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15

ARK 1

ROK  
MEDIA

# Ark Volume 1

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# Prologue

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‘Is this where the reception room is?’

Kim Hyun Woo raised his old glasses.

The building was only a 5 minute walk from the South Seoul station.

The front of the building, the sunlight reflected the words “Global Exos Korea” on a black marble.

Knowing the sign represented a once in a lifetime opportunity; it intimidated him.

He did not have the courage to go in, but he lacked nearly as much courage to turn back.

He took a deep breath and walked into the building.

“I’m here for an interview.”

“Go on up to the third floor.”

The Model-like receptionist motioned him towards the elevator.

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

While nodding, he stepped back, bowed and walked away. As he heard a stifled laughter from behind him, he began to blush.

He roughly understood why she was laughing.

After abruptly receiving news of the interview he was forced to come for an interview in an oversized borrowed suit.

He became flustered realizing how foolish and ugly he looked wearing the oversized suit.

Of course there were plenty of different contacts but it wouldn't come close in comparison...

He had arrived on the third floor, and the lounge was filled to capacity.

People in fancy suits were out and about.

Surprisingly some of the people were wearing blue jeans and t-shirts, their faces were filled with confidence showing their work experience.

His eyes became clouded as he thought about going for the interview with these people.

No, he was not sure he could really go to the interview in his current state.

'Should I not have come? At this rate will I be able to get an opportunity better than this?'

Hyun Woo let out a sigh with an uneasy look on his face.

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Hyun Woo was an ordinary youth. At least until 5 years ago.

He was an average high school student who liked brand-name items, bought the newest cell phone whilst his parents nagged at him, and played games the entire day on the weekends. Up until then, he would often watch the stories of the boys on the T.V., and empathized with them on one hand, while thinking he could never live like the boy in the T.V. That is, until it became reality.

He received an urgent call at school.

He was told his parents had been in a car accident.

With one simple call, Hyun Woo's life was changed.

His father had died, while his mother surviving after numerous operations, but complications still remained.

The cause of the accident was his father's drowsiness while driving. The victims still had to be compensated. Nevertheless their insurance had expired without renewal so the insurance company claimed it wasn't their responsibility.

The police and victims attorney had dropped by a few times.

While Hyun Woo had been trying to understand the situation and complicated conversations that had taken place, their house was sold, and they terminated various savings and insurance plans.

To fix that problem, they rented a small apartment. However, his mother still needed to be treated urgently.

Their private medical insurance was bought 10 years ago.

Nevertheless, every time his mother went to the hospital because of a cold, stomach ache, or miscellaneous, she required more treatment than an average person. Together with intensive care she needed, the insurance company's attitude began to change. They gave him pamphlets written in English and Chinese, while prattling on about changing compensation limit. Because of this, they had to pay 3 to 4 million won in dues every month.

- It may be tough, but hang in there for your mother. Use this to pay for the hospital fees.

Five uncles from both of the mother's and father's side stuck an envelope inside an absent-minded Hyun Woo's pocket. But they did not show themselves again.

He felt horrible. The money in his pockets only amounted to 3,000,000 won. It was not enough to even cover a month's hospital bill.

In order to cover living expenses and hospital bills, the debt steadily increased. Hyun Woo realized it for the first time. The little boy who earned a living was shown on T.V, was not mature. He was facing a situation where he had no choice other than to grow up and be mature. The situation makes a person.

He knew very well the meaning of those words. Hyun Woo's life had changed. Waking up at dawn to do newspaper and milk deliveries then working at a part-time job from evening to dawn in order to gain money. In the past it was inconceivable to wash one's body while working part-time at a construction site.

His body ached all over but he continued working rather than relaxing.

It was not because he was exceptionally earnest. He had no other choice but to do it. However, his earnings could barely cover the cost of living and hospital expenses.

'With relatives coming for a visit, I won't be able to relax because of the noise!'

Every time they arrived, all he could do was clench his fist.

He heard his father had a good personality. There was not a single friend's family gathering he missed, and he would withdraw from his savings without hesitation whenever a relative got in some big trouble. However, the reward he received from the heavens was almost as if it came out of a novel.

After his father died, and as his mother accrued hospital bills, no one leaped in to help them. Worse, they did not even loan them some money. It was because they did not think they would be able to get the money back. Their relationship was weak because they were made when his family's situation was still good.

Hyun Woo also became keenly aware of the cold endless reality before he graduated from high school.

No matter how special a person is, in the end they are just like any other person.

'I exist only to take care of my mother and myself!'

His mind was set on dropping out of high school, but his mother, on her sickbed, would not hear anything about the matter. He had no choice but to deal with it for one more year.

However, after he graduated from high school, it did not improve the situation they were in.

After he graduated High School Hyun Woo set out to look for a job. Although his work had hours increased, other things remained the same. As usual, he worked all day, and his days became filled with anxiety trying to meet the hospital bills and the ever growing debts payments at the end of every month.

He gradually began to envy his peer who carried the latest mobile or wore the latest fashions.

He had also envied those who could have money to spare. It was one thing Hyun Woo could not stop himself from envying. Hyun Woo since an early age had dreamt of being an employee at a video game production company. Before the accident had occurred, he often stayed up all night playing games. If not, perhaps another career related to computers.

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Although he abandoned the idea of going to a university he did not abandon his dream.

It was the reason why every month he would pay 300,000 won to attend a private institution.

One day an instructor came up to Hyun Woo and asked.

“Hyun Woo, have you thought of seeking employment at a gaming company?”

“A gaming company?”

“Hmm, a sunbae told me he knows a video game company who are currently recruiting new employees. I was asked to recommend some excellent students, and I was thinking about recommending you. How about it? Would you like to be employed by a gaming company?”

“Would a non-university graduate be acceptable?”

“20 years of age or older is preferable. There’s no gender and educational requirement.”

“Where is it?”

“Have you heard of Global Exos?”

“Yes?”

Hyun Woo froze in place.

It’s expected for education to not be regarded for a small gaming company.

However, not from a company as big as Global Exos! The company was the zenith of all companies in the gaming industry.

They were the first to implement the concept of virtual reality into game, and they’ve also released 2 epic games in which accumulated annual sales of 1 Trillion won.

“What would Global Exos be lacking in order for them to employ people such as myself?”

“I don’t know the details either. According to my sunbae, employee recruitment process is done in various ways, it is very unique.

Screening of documents for educational background or work experience is not a priority. And the things were being tested is entirely different and so the way they pay their employees. However with many applicants, it will not be easy... Since I don't know what interpersonal work is, I'll try to put the files in."

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A world where one's educational background was not prioritized. These were the words once said a long time ago.

However Hyun Woo was not naive enough to instantly believe those words.

Without educational background, it limits the employee a chances for a position in such a large business, and is normally limited to things such as an external position. Even more so with Global Exos, and if he wasn't accepted he would feel really bad about it.

"Applying with my high school diploma won't get me accepted accepted. So I'd rather..."

Name: Kim Hyun Woo

Gender: Male Age:22

Educations: S Electronic Engineering 2nd Year, Dropout.

Top seat of the class, without having missed any class.

Although unknown to the Media Network, hacked through their firewall during their conference for testing a mock game system, and became a large issue, which eventually led to voluntary withdrawal.

Global Exos was such a large company. Surely they would not examine the authenticity of each application. When he thought about it, it was impossible for them to do so.

Perhaps, but trying wouldn't hurt, besides, he's got nothing to lose..

All this time he had forgotten about the application when unexpected news came.

“The other day when I told you about Global Exos? Your application has passed the screening, and they’ve contacted us.”

Hyun Woo’s instructor was just as surprised as he was.

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While he was daydreaming, the interviewer had already arrived here. In any case, he was given a chance to meet the interviewer.

Perhaps this could be a golden opportunity. Which why he thought he had to make most of it, even if he had to resort to clinging to the interviewer’s pant legs.

‘Have I gone crazy? Whose idea was it to come to this place? Having applied with a fabricated diploma was the least of my problems... At this rate who knows what kind of random things will appear on the news? No, surely Global Exos being a large enterprise, will be liable for having caused an incident of forged documents, with one of their applicants, will cause quite a stir and won’t be profitable to them... Oh, but wouldn’t turning back right now be equally insane crazy?’

He casually imagined the scene of himself being handcuffed and bombarded with questions from reporters.

“Oh, will you be staying here?”

Suddenly, he heard a woman’s voice beside him.

Since he was already surprised, he lifted his head and saw the receptionist whom he met in the hallway standing there in a formal suit.

“This seat is empty. Would you like to sit here?”

She nodded and sat down next to him.

“I’m sorry for laughing earlier. Did I offend you?”

“It’s alright. It must’ve been hard not to laugh. I look really funny, don’t I?”

“Yes?”

After seeing the strange glance the receptionist gave as a response to his question, he made a puzzled face.

“Ah.....It looks like there’s a misunderstanding. I wasn’t laughing because of your clothes. There really isn’t anybody who would bow deeply to a receptionist. I was laughing because I thought you were a slightly eccentric person. Also, your clothes suit you quite nicely”

Hyun Woo’s face became red. Could this mean he had an inferiority complex?

“I’m sorry for misunderstanding”

“No I’m sorry for causing the misunderstanding.”

“By the way, why are you here?”

“To be honest, I’ve also submitted an application. My name is Kang Misu”

“Oh, My name is Kim Hyun Woo.”

Kang Misu extended her hand. Meanwhile, Hyun Woo wiped his hands on his pants and was about to shake her hand...

“All the candidates please head over to the auditorium.”

‘Damn. Whatever. I’ll probably die or faint anyway. Wait, I wouldn’t die from this, would I?’

Unable to break away from crowd, Hyun Woo was swept away into the auditorium.

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Approximately 2000 people were packed tightly inside the auditorium.

Since only about 10 people would be chosen, The ratio of being chosen was 1 to 200. Everyone's attention was on the stage where a man in his late 20's stood.

"Nice to meet you, everyone. I am the Planning Director, Ha Myung Woo. On behalf of Global Exos I would like to thank all of you for gathering here today."

His speech was followed by loud applause.

Ha Myung Woo nodded gently and said.

"Then let's go straight to point of what everybody has been wondering about. Those of you here who are aware of Global Exos' announcement last month regarding a new virtual reality game called New World, could please raise your hand?"

Most of the people raised their hands. However, Hyun Woo didn't raise his.

Virtual reality games were not available for regular computers.

If one wanted to play it, they had to buy a commercial network unit, which cost a considerable amount of money.

Although there was also virtual reality gaming centers.

Because the cost of a unit is expensive, they charged a high service fee.

Ha Myung Woo nodded his head.

"I see most of you have heard of it. However, because limited information was released, we will explain it briefly. Global Exos created the world's first ever Virtual Reality game which changed the gaming industry. Soon after, one after another, gaming companies

have started to make virtual reality games, and eventually led to the popularity of Virtual Reality. But the game we announced to be released is original and a whole new innovation.”

Some people who had experience with those games nodded their heads.

During the following discussion, Hyun Woo’s mouth was wide open in awe.

Up until now, virtual reality games have amounted to a visual image has been implanted directly into the retinas in order to perceive the virtual world.

The game New World was going to be different than any other games. Information received from the retina will be directly delivered to the brain, which allows the game to be perceived as a real-world experience.

Thanks to that, it’s no longer just seeing, but experiencing another world with all five senses.

For the last 3 years, Hyun Woo lived without playing games, and the advancement in technology was amazement to him.

“It’s true the expense will reach four times as much as an existing unit. However, New World is not a simple game. We are heading towards a new age. I am confident we will be able to create a new culture and will last 10 to 20 years into the future. The recruitment test this time was to pick a capable people who will be managing New World, as well as making history.”

“What are the requirements to pass the screening?”

Right then, someone asked.

“Everyone is probable wondering about the passing requirements. Among those of you who are present, you might identify yourself as inexperienced or uneducated, but as of this moment, I want everyone

to forget about those labels. We have decided not to take those matters into account. New World is a project that will last for dozens of years, and we are recruiting people based on their talent to be able to manage a long-term project. In simpler terms, we will be judging based on your passion for this game as well as the possibility of future growth.”

Physicist, Chemist, Astronomers, medical experts, and even experts in Nanoscience. Dozens of experts will spend years studying the virtual reality game, The New World.

However, Global Exos was not looking for an employee with knowledge in those subjects. But rather, an employee who knew how to start a fire. Global Exos was looking for one who could manipulate the fire, was what Ha Myung Woo explained.

“How will you determine those who are qualified?”

“The method we’ll be using is quite simple.”

Ha Myung Woo parted his lips slightly and replied.

“Tomorrow afternoon, everyone will receive access to their own gaming unit with New World installed on it. With this unit, you are to create a new account for New World. Inside the game, if you accomplish a particular condition, an event will occur and you can think of as a formal certificate of employment. Furthermore, while the test is in progress, Global Exos will be paying you a minimum of 1.5 million Won every month. This is the company’s policy is to ensure everyone will be able to completely concentrate on the game and play with similar conditions.”

It was an unprecedented way obtaining employment caused a disturbance in the auditorium.

As the unrest settled down and questions started to be asked.

“What conditions must be achieved?”

“Are you talking about a quest?”

“Or is it about obtaining some rare items?”

“I’ve predicted you would have a lot of questions. However, I can’t tell you specific information. What I can tell you is there are many ways you can achieve your goal, and also, there is no set path towards the goal.”

“Are you saying the goal of this test is to obtain something inside the game?”

“You are correct. However, we will not give you any clues. Isn’t that the most fun part of a game?”

Ha Myung Woo said in joyful voice. However, there was no one who shared his happiness.

“You have freedom to do what you wish inside the game. Although you are given your freedom, it is your responsibility to follow the rules. It is also up to you to choose your own goals. Depending on your situation, you will be judged as we see fit.”

“How long will the testing period be?”

“How many people will you be recruiting?”

“We will be recruiting only 10 people.”

“The testing period will end when we have chosen 10 people.”

Ha Myung Woo added with a smile.

“Perhaps this might be the longest testing period of employee recruitment in history. However, the game New World is worth investing your time and effort in. Without a doubt.”

“I hope this would motivate people to combine their strength and work together. Fighting~”

Kang Misu said with a beautiful smile as she came out to talk to the people in the auditorium.

There was definitely nothing he looked forward to more than working with this beauty in an office of the large conglomerate.

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Hyun Woo stood idly at the convenience store counter eyeing a Global Exos' brochure.

He knew it was one of the world's largest corporations but he did not expect it to be at this level.

On the pamphlet were the written details of the employees who passed the special test.

It was rumored New World's exclusive Planning Department receives an assigned annual salary of approximately 100 million won.

Considering the starting salary of a large enterprise was 40 million, this was exceptional.

In addition, there was a full page article of the company's guaranteed benefits.

'It seems like only 2000 people were qualified. If they give everyone 1.5 million won, that's 30 billion a month! Even if the test runs for only three to four months, they will be spending over 100 billion! Since they're spending so much money on just the recruitment exam...'

Literally a dream Job!

It was a job that could resolve all of Hyun Woo's problems in one go.

More than anything, Hyun Woo was captivated by the unique recruitment test.

They didn't want a close to perfect score on the TOEIC evaluation, nor did they want someone with an amazing work experience.

If they were looking for those kinds of things, he would not have applied for the job.

However, they proposed a method of achieving something inside the game as a test to get employed. Therefore, the only condition was to be good at games.

'Did they really not investigate my education?'

If the falsification of his educational background were to come out of the light, it might become a big issue.

No, it might not even get detected. As he thought about it, his hope swelled up.

'This way, there might be some hope for me.'

Since his younger years, Hyun Woo had always loved to play games.

Although he spent a lot of time playing amazing games, they weren't memorable.

Furthermore once he had completed the game, all items obtained could be sold for money.

Even so, he didn't think getting employed would be easy.

Ratio of 200 to 1. The other candidates would also rush forward with their lives on the line.

However, since they are all starting with same conditions, he was confident he wouldn't become left behind.

'It's a once in a lifetime chance. I can't miss this!'

That same day, Hyun Woo quit his part-time job at the convenience store, and stopped his milk and newspaper deliveries.

However, because of the cost of living, and hospital bills, he cannot overindulge himself by quitting two of his other part time jobs.

With the 1.5 million won Global Exos promised as a salary, he still could not even afford the hospital bills.

He did not blindly believe his debt was resolved by itself. He understood tomorrow his debt would still increase.

Therefore, he needed a little more like to save up.

‘Since I have less time than the others, I have to do this as if it was life-and-death situation.’

As soon as he finished work, he immediately headed for home.

‘I should try looking for information about the game...’

However, Hyun Woo started to shake his head.

‘It’s just information. Experiencing it first-hand will allow me to understand the game faster.’

Hyun Woo immediately went to the unit. After he turned on the power, he heard a low whirring sound and suddenly, everything went dark.

Suddenly, a piercing light, along with a new world, unfolded before him.

# New World

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– Starting initial operations. Scanning for necessary personal data.  
Unregistered user detected. Please register a new account.

Someone spoke from within a space enclosed in light.

Following the guide, as soon as he gave his personal information, a red light scanned his body.

Soon after, a character dressed in leather bearing a similar appearance to Hyun-Woo appeared in front of him.

– The state of the appearance shown is scanned from the user. If you wish, you may change your appearance, sex, or race. However be warned, each account is limited to one character. Once the character has been created, you may not alter or delete your character. Please think carefully before deciding.

A limit of one character per account. This was not a rare restriction for a virtual reality game.

Being able to change character appearance in game lessens the sense of physical immersion.

Having always worn glasses he thought his face looked a little strange.

Hyun-Woo contemplated and then adjusted his face structure a little.

He chose the Human race. This was typically a very average choice in most games.

Since he had not selected a profession and did not choose any skills, he would become a human aptitude for all professions.

– Please select your character’s name.

“Ark.”

It was the name that came to him when he received his unit.

He was using it in a biblical sense. Not because the cocoon round-like appearance reminded him of the Ark, but rather the fact Hyun-Woo’s future depended on this Unit. Even if it was tedious, there was no helping it.

– Users of the Human race may choose from four starting locations. Harun, the frontier town of Schudenberg Kingdom, Bristania Kingdom’s Changing Lot, and the small Kutran Castle in the Principality of Sinius. No matter which place you select, all the choices were similar. The townspeople are kind to strangers...

“Schudenberg Kingdom’s frontier town, Harun.”

Schudenberg Kingdom was the closest to the middle of the continent.

– If you would like a more detailed explanation about the New World....

“Skip.”

All game have similar introduction such as this.

In the beginning stages actual knowledge about the game doesn’t help much.

Above all, experience was the best type of knowledge. After canceling the tutorial, Hyun-Woo was enveloped in a bright light.

At the same time his characters eyes moved and he was absorbed within it.

The novice adventurer, Ark was born.

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“What the heck?”

Ark had a bewildered look on his face.

He was surrounded by mountains and mountain villages.

In the village there were around 100 houses surrounded by high barriers.

This must be the beginning town Harun.

However Ark still could not believe his eyes.

‘Is this really part of a game?’

He could not believe it. The surrounding mountains. The fences and buildings, even the people who were wandering around...

This was completely different from Computer Graphics. It wasn’t something you can see visually.

He could feel his leather shoes, the wind whooshing by his ears, and even smell food being prepared somewhere from a distance.

It felt like reality, but wasn’t reality which made the situation all the more difficult to believe.

‘I know this is a virtual reality, but I can’t believe it’s a game.’

The virtual reality gaming experience used to be solely based on retina graphics.

This was as of 3 years ago. To this day most virtual reality games had still not escaped the dimension of having retina graphic based game.

‘Now I understand why Director Ha Myung Woo spoke with prideful

words.'

Just one month ago Global Exos had announced New World, which resulted in it becoming the hot topic of gossip in many other games. Now he understood why this was happening.

If his situation had been more favourable, he would have stopped at nothing to play this game.

The technology developed by Global Exos was incredible.

'Ah, now is not the time to be doing this.'

Ark, who had his mouth wide open, wiped his drool.

Several people around him look at him with dull look on their faces.

They were going through the same process of adaptation as Ark.

Blushing from embarrassment Ark moved to a more adequate place.

'Where should I head off now?'

Ark saw the way other people moved their bodies and copied them.

Although he was actually connected to the unit lying down. He felt like he was actually moving.

Although moving little parts of his body was rough, it process was similar to moving in real life.

'Ok, movements don't seem to require any special procedures'

Ark then investigated the system window.

"Menu."

A translucent circle appeared in front of him listed various items.

Character info, bags, community, et cetera, you could either talk directly to the menu or tap the icon. Ark pressed the icon which looked like a face.

The pair of Character Information Windows that appeared were not simplistic in design. Afterwards he confirmed his skill window was completely empty. The contents of his bag were; 10 units of water, 10 pieces of wheat bread, and a dagger.

He was excited, and felt as if a new life was just beginning.

‘Well, what should I do now.’

Ark closed the information window and looked around.

Everything was so much like reality it was hard to distinguish NPCs from normal users

But both users and NPCs showed no interest in Ark since he began.

Everyone was running around like crazy.

In most games, there would be a kind NPC who would teach you when you first start out.

Looking around for a bit, he spotted an old man who kept his eyes on him from a distance.

Ark walked over to him.

“Ex..... Excuse me.”

“You must be new here.”

Without having to say anything, the old man spoke as if he understood the entire situation.

“What is your name?”

“My name is Ark.”

“My name is Hansen. I’m just an old guy whose purpose in life is to teach young guys, such as yourself, how to live in this place. As expected, you probably want to ask about what to do in this place?”

“Yes.”

“Most people who are like you commonly work one of two jobs here. One is wild dog and wolf hunting outside of this village, and another one finding work in the village. If you’re just playing casually, it’s better to choose the latter option. Since this is a backwater village, we’re always short-handed.”

“Yes, I like to be provided a job.”

Ark replied without hesitation.

However, the greatest danger in a game is not learning how to hunt carefully and embarking without reason or under bad influence.

Therefore doing a simple quest would be good idea to adapt to the game.

Early beginnings of a game consisted of mostly of doing quests to adapt to the flow of the game and earn equipment. Hence, was more profitable than aimlessly hunting.

“I’m thankful you took time to listen to me. As it so happens, there’s a job I’d like to entrust to you. Recently I’ve heard the tavern owner was complaining about the amount of mice in his cellar. I think you would be able to solve the problem. How about it? Will you help?”

Du-du-dung. An information window came up along with a strange sound.

Kraydon, who owns the tavern in the gloomy backwater village of Harun, has gotten headaches over the growing mouse problem in

recent years. Meet Kraydon, listen to his problem, and then deal with it. It's a job that should be easy even for a beginner. Difficulty: Not Applicable

Ark accepted the quest and headed towards the tavern.

Finding the tavern was quite easy. It was the only building overflowing with customers, in the town square.

As he entered the tavern a messy haired boy wearing an apron could be heard yelling.

"You came with a recommendation from the Old Man Hansen?"

With a relieved look on his face, Ark began to speak to Kraydon.

"Nice to meet you. Can you do me a little favour and kill the mice inside the warehouse down the street. Lately, I think if I hear them one more time, I'll lose my mind!"

"Yes. I will do it. But what will the compensation be?"

Ark indirectly asked. Whether in it is reality or inside a game, no one believed in working free of charge.

Work should be compensated. It's only natural right?

Kraydon started beating on his chest and replied.

"Of course, I, Kraydon, am not of the cheap nature to swindle a stranger who has no home or belongings after he has eaten his fill. I have prepared a reward essential for someone like you."

"I look forward to it."

Ark entered the warehouse with a daring smile.

The warehouse had been congested with many swarms of mice.

Both sides officially recognized the other as an easy target as they faced one another.

'My first test subjects will be you guys! Now, shall we begin?'

Ark drew his dagger, charged and swung his dagger, and attacked one of the mice.

However, he got a result he did not expect. Embarrassingly, the mouse lightly sidestepped the moving dagger. Also, as if mocking his sloppy display of skill, they ran between the boxes, knocking them over.

Similar occurrence kept repeating. Ark was growing angry at the loitering mice who light dodged as often as he swung his dagger at them.

'Huh? There's no way this should be happening?'

How could he be unable to even kill one mouse? Ark grew puzzled.

In all of the games he's played until now, mice were mobs who died out even if they saw a sword. However, these mice were different.

As if they were actual copies, the mice moved as they would in reality. Their speed was no joke.

While he was flustered, a bright light suddenly flashed in his eyes.

– You have been attacked by a Mouse. You have received 1 damage.

Far from killing them, he was hurt instead.

Just because it was only 1 damage, it did not mean he could ignore it. The mice, seeing Ark getting flustered, seemed to judge him as an easy opponent. In an instant, enough had gathered to block the view of the ground and started biting him. In the blink of an eye, his health had dropped down to 20.

Ark, who became frightened, quickly backed away.

'These little... If I'm not careful, I might die from being attacked by mice.'

Nobody, in the entire world, gets bitten by mice and then dies from it.

Ark calmed his emotions. He could not afford to get hit anymore.

Ark carefully marked the assaulting mouse, and struck the moment they ran forward to bite him.

The mouse screeched with pain and split into two halves.

– You have killed a Mouse. You have earned 1 EXP.

At last, he heard the welcoming sound accompanied a message window popped up.

When Ark started to properly counterattack, the mice were eliminated at lightning speed.

Meanwhile, Ark killed several more mice. He also drove them back to their holes one by one as he swung his dagger. The mice did not take it lying down.

Several of them began to cooperate with one another, and started to leap at him after hiding in boxes and counterattacked. The fierce fighting between the human and the mice lasted 30 minutes.

At the end of the battle, he only had 3 loaves of wheat bread left. In order to recover his lowered health, he had consumed 7 loaves. The durability of his 2 attack point dagger and his 2 defence point leather armour also dropped significantly. It was an empty victory.

'Phew, whatever happened, I killed them all. While it was difficult, my experience should've risen substantially, right?'

Ark opened up his character window in order to inspect the good results and promptly had an unhappy expression.

One mouse gave 1 EXP. However, even though he killed over 30, he only received 30 EXP.

He thought because he was just starting out, it was not a small amount.

However, after looking at his experience bar, it had not even risen one percent.

No matter the extreme difficulty in fighting them, mice were mice.

His disappointment was unrivalled. However, Ark reined in his emotions.

Because no matter what, a quest was still a quest, there would still be some reward later.

“All the mice have been wiped out.”

“Oh, yes? Very good. I have a little something for you.”

Kraydon laughed broadly as he took out 10 wheat bread.

“...”

Ark who had been eagerly looking forward to his reward, stare at Kraydon in horror.

There could be no way he would spend more than 30 minutes in a life or death struggle, all he would receive was some wheat bread.

However, Kraydon, if anything, looked blankly at Ark as if there was something wrong with him.

“No way, is there some kind of mistake?”

“What do you mean? Isn’t it most important you are still alive?”

“But.....”

“You expect to receive better rewards for killing some mice?”

Ark had fevertion so he kept his mouth shut suffering in silence.

He spent 30 minutes and cleaned up 7 loaves of wheat bread to hunt the mice.

His dagger and his leather armour were in disrepair. And the reward was a mere 10 loaves of wheat bread? Was it a joke? But what use was there in arguing with an NPC for an opponent?

Furthermore, wheat bread was cheap but inconvenient.

However, Ark accepted and took the 10 pieces of bread and left the tavern.

He returned to Hansen with a dissatisfied expression and asked him.

“Aren’t there any more decent jobs?”

“Hehe, this guy. You’re being too greedy from the very start. You’re a newcomer to this place. Who would entrust an important task to a newcomer? If you want a job with large rewards, you need to build more trust.”

‘It appears the game is affected by the level of intimacy’

Many games before virtual reality games emphasised on relationship between NPCs.

It was a feature of the game that one’s intimacy with an NPC determined which quests, information, and skills you would be exposed to.

This kind of system played the role of an imaginary space where one could experience significance of reality.

Therefore there was no way a high-tech company like New World would not implement a system such as this.

‘In other words, newbies had to grind the low-reward quests in order to get better rewards.’

Ark was about to ask another question after understanding the basic concept.

Someone struck up a conversation from behind him.

“Are you a newbie?”

He turned around and saw a cute girl coming closer.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Are you trying to get a quest from the elder by any chance?”

Ark nodded his head as a smirk rose on her face.

However, as soon as Ark made an unpleasant expression, she quickly smiled.

“Oh, sorry. However, trying to get a quest from the elder isn’t exactly the best idea.”

“Why?”

“The quests this elder provides are all low-reward and low-experience. Although I did a few of his quests just in case, he kept giving me similar quests. There are people who have also tried over fifty times. However, the only things they’ve received in increase were the repair costs.”

“Then what should I be doing in the beginning?”

“The best thing to do is to hunt Wild Dogs in the outskirts of the village. While the normal thing is hunt rabbits or raccoons at level 1,

the EXP you receive is only a little bit higher than mice... The reason why there is hardly anyone in the village is because everyone is out hunting wild dogs.”

“Wild dogs?”

Ark bore an anxious expression as he repeated the question.

Just killing a few mice was an arduous task. Would not hunting wild dogs be more difficult?

However, the girl opened her mouth as if she had read his mind.

“It’s hard to kill them alone. That’s why everyone forms a party to hunt them. As it so happens, a person whom I was hunting with and I, were having a bit of trouble, so would you like to hunt with us?”

“Yeah? Are you sure it’s alright? I’m only at level 1?”

“It’s okay. I also started today, so I’ve only reached level 2. And the other person is level 3.”

“Yes, then please let me join.”

“Please follow me. The other member is outside.”

Her party mate was a large man who was eating wheat bread at the village gates.

It was a rare sight for someone in the starting village to be equipped with a longsword.

As she introduced herself, Ark quickly examined her from top to bottom and nodded his head.

“Well, at least a level three would be better than a level one and two.”

The man was Andel, and the woman was called Bulma.

Both Andel and Bulma were also beginning New World but were more well-informed than Ark.

Although he started around the same time as Ark, he was able to level up by forming a party and hunting wild dogs.

“Well then, we have no time to be playing around”

As they walked a bit, they came across a field where Wild Dogs were meandering in.

Bulma said in a nervous tone.

“You can’t stop being vigilant everyday just because it’s close to the village. They’re stronger than they appear, so you have to kill them by luring them one at a time.”

As Andel silently drew closer to a Wild Dog, he hit it and escaped behind it. He was far enough so other Wild Dogs would not jump in, and swung his long sword.

The wild dog howled in pain as it took the piercing attack.

Meanwhile, Ark and Bulma sprang at it. However, the battle was not as simple as they thought. Their fear clouded their judgement.

While one may say what kind of fear is there in a game, the Wild Dog, which was exquisitely detailed down to each individual hair, appeared no different from reality.

In reality, he had never even fought a cat before. He had not even imagined fighting a Wild Dog, let alone actually fights one. Seeing those Wild Dogs bare their teeth at him chilled him down to his bones. Their movements were also alarming. They were so fast Ark, who was wielding a dagger, could not hit them even once.

“Jeez, Ark. What are you doing?”

“Uhm uhm, thi-this...”

Ark suffered a bite to his thigh as a result of the Wild Dog's attack.

Immediately, he lost 30 HP. As he became frightened and started retreating, Andel and Bulma struck the Wild Dog from behind, barely managing to kill it. When the Wild dog fell, it dropped leather and meat.

Andel naturally picked up everything then looked disapprovingly at Ark.

"Is this your first time playing a Virtual Reality game?"

"Not really..."

It was his first time playing the real thing.

Andel glared at Bulma with eyes full of reproach.

Why did you bring back a guy like this?

Bulma looked at Ark with a resentful expression.

Ark's face became flushed as he suddenly became marked as a dead man.

It was not always good to have a game be able to express every single expression.

They had killed more Wild Dogs, but the results always turned out the same.

"Ark, I can't attack if you suddenly come to my side!"

"Oh, are you really going to stab me?"

"You want me to retreat back there? How am I supposed to attack?"

"Ah, but you're terrible."

Andel had an annoyed expression as he complained.

Ark got flustered and was chased by the wild dogs, and as a result, Andel and Bulma killed everything.

Since he wasn't even able to properly stab anything with his dagger, he did not receive any experience. Even the leather and meat that dropped were monopolized by Andel, of course. While Bulma did not say anything, Ark, who was only causing trouble, could not even complain.

No, it was not an issue of complaining.

"Please take a moment to look at what we're doing from behind us."

'Damn, won't I get kicked at this rate?'

Ark grew restless at Andel's brusque tone.

There are only 4 loaves left. His equipment was frayed as if it would fall apart at any moment.

No party would pick up a player who got kicked out with Ark's appearance.

His days of desperately fighting mice for 10 loaves of wheat bread and 1 EXP would continue.

Furthermore, connections were important in games.

If any person played a game, then they understand how important it is to have even one more person on their side.

'Fine. This time, I want to get a hit in and die with no regrets.'

Ark had a firm resolve.

Suddenly, another Wild Dog lured by Andel had arrived.

Ark did not listen to Andel's advice at all, and, after taking the

vanguard, swung at a Wild Dog with his dagger. As he fought it as if his life depended on it, the dog flattered and shrank back.

For the first time, Ark was able to hit the wild dog with his dagger.

At the same time, the wild dog's attack struck Ark.

– You have received a fatal blow from a Wild Dog. You have taken 50 damage.

Ark felt a dizzy sensation and staggered around before collapsing on his back.

“Not that way!”

Bulma shouted not because she was worried about Ark but because she was surprised. The Wild Dogs took a step forward towards where Ark had collapsed and began to gather.

Bulma and Andel's faces were white with terror. Even with their level, the Wild Dogs were an overwhelming opponent. Even more so when there was 5 of them!

“Damn, it's all over.”

“That's why you should stay at the back!”

Ark overflowing with dissatisfaction.

‘Damn, how about I quit the party.’

Ark clenched his fists tightly until they bit into his hands and got up.

“I'll block them while you run away.”

“Yes? Ha, but then...”

Bulma was baffled as Andel pulled on her with a jerk.

Without looking back, Ark drew out his dagger and swung it in

random directions.

Two of the Wild Dog who gathered around Ark, chased him. Simultaneously, he saw flashing red lights coming from all directions. When he heard three or four system messages saying he has received some damages, the vision from both his eyes started to turn dark. Not long after, Ark collapsed and the Wild Dogs retreated to their original position.

His very first death.

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As he opened his eyes he saw some supplies near the castle gate.

– You have suffered critical injuries. Fortunately, you were saved quickly and received treatment at the Quartermaster's Station. Life will recover. However, due to the risky operation a penalty will be imposed.

Please confirm the details in the character information window.

“Are you alright?”

The system messages overlapped with Bulma's voice.

Ark was embarrassed and started scratching his head.

“Oh, I'm sorry. Did you almost die because of me?”

“No, it was thanks to you I'm alive. But Ark.....”

“It's no problem. After all, I didn't even have 1% experience.”

Ark had never thought of his death was of any importance.

It was common sense in the case of death in a game, experience would be reduced. In some cases, lose their items. This was the reason why people struggled to not be killed.

However Ark was different. He did not care to lose experience since he had just started.

Neither did he drop any of his items. The only players who did not fear death were level 1 players.

Therefore Ark tilted his head since he was unable to understand Bulma's reaction.

"Yes? What experience? I'm just saying..."

Andel, as if became aware of something, suddenly blocked Bulma's path.

"Ah yes, I hadn't thought Ark-nim had just recently started the game."

Andel's eyes sparkled as he proposed an idea.

"Then how about we do this? Let's hunt something a little stronger than Wild Dogs, something like Wolves. If it's Wolves, I'm sure we'll be able to take them down. I've heard there were some cases where a party was killing a Wolf and various other Wolves would come and gather around them making it almost impossible to hunt. But if Ark-nim were to tank them for us and die in our place, Wolves are worth challenging. Although Ark-nim will not receive any experience, we'll divide any items dropped from killing Wolves. The beginners' items they drop can be sold for a considerable amount of money."

"But Andel-nim."

Bulma looked at Andel with a surprised expression. Her eyes told him he asked for too much.

Nevertheless Ark nodded his head without a second thought.

"If you're sure, why not."

He thought Andel's proposition wasn't a bad one.

Even if he refused and left the party, there was nothing else he could do.

It would be more useful if he was able to face a superior Wolf and adapt.

He currently did not stand a chance; death was inevitable.

For a good reason, he also wouldn't be distributed any items nor receive any loot unless Wolves appeared.

"It's beneficial to have Ark-nim."

Andel lead the party to the fields in high spirits.

Andel's attitude towards Ark did a complete 180. In order to repair his equipment, he would have to pay 30 copper. And whenever situations get dangerous, he was grateful for reducing the chances of death. After the party finished their item repairs, they walked passed the pack of Wild Dogs towards the place where Wolves gather.

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Wolves, undoubtedly are several times stronger than stray dogs. It was an opponent you can barely win against yourself.

\*Aooo!\*

As several Wolves were caught and on death's door, they howled towards the sky.

There is a reason for this. The distant Wolves would surge in to the support of their comrades.

On all occasions it was the level 1, Ark, who bravely intercepted them.

“These bastards. All of you come at me!”

Naturally they would frantically claw and bite as they lay down on the floor.

But Ark refused to bat an eye.

‘Huhuhu. Slaughtering as I please. After all I am a pitiful creature with nothing to lose.’

Ark arose up like a zombie once more from the Quartermaster’s Station and set out to hunt Wolves once more.

After he died about ten times, an information window popped up along with a sound effects and shining lights.

– You have learned a new skill. Indomitable Will (Beginner, Passive): You have undergone countless lives and deaths; your mind is uncrushable and abundant with courage.

While under critical conditions, piercing the enemy’s weak point will break their concentration and allows you to heal faster than others.

During times of crisis:

+30% Critical Rate.

+5% Recovery Rate.

‘Aha, is this a gift from the heavens?’

Would this lead to destitute? Though he had died several times, he never imagined of receiving a new skill.

The quicker Ark separated the pack of Wolves, the fasted they died.

The people who watched Ark hunted started making comments.

“Wahhh. That person never seem to get tired.”

“It’s a brave warrior. A soldier. A level 1 veteran.”

“Is he out of his mind? Maybe doesn’t know how to play this game?”

Sarcasm could be heard one time or another, and sometimes a voice of concern.

‘Hmph. Those people do not know anything...’

However, Ark did not mind their words. Ark opened his bag and took a peek. Inside were filled with Wolf leather and meat. Seeing this reassured his mind.

At level 1, he was adapting to Wild Dogs and Wolves while obtaining item drops from them. What problems can there be? Despite Andel and Bulma’s higher level, Ark was not at a disadvantage.

In others perspective, Ark might certainly seemed he was recklessly hunting, however, Ark was also gaining a lot of information.

Andel and Bulma had never experienced playing a virtual reality game like this.

The two current level 3 players originally thought Wolves were overwhelming opponents.

However, the two players were expertly dealing critical blows. Following Ark’s lead, they did not hesitate to swing their weapons and attack. Thanks to the level 1 player, they were able to hunt Wolves continuously for about two hours.

‘Huh, what’s going on?’

Ark had experienced something strange.

Somehow, he started moving slower and slower over time, and felt out of breath. Although he wield his dagger, he lacked strength.

It was as if he had several lead weights on his arms and legs.

Bulma, who noticed Ark's movement slowing down over time down, had a sorry expression on her face.

However, Andel who was still at a distance, said.

"Perhaps he is unable to continue since he is not familiar with virtual reality games. We should call it a day. Hunting grounds are dangerous when a party member is unable to move."

"Yes, I guessed so."

"It was all thanks to you, hunting was easier. I will see you later."

"Can I... Register you as a friend?"

"We'll call you next time."

In the end, Andel had left before he could say anything else.

Bulma hesitantly approached him, took out a sword from her bag, and held it out to him.

"Take this. It's not a bad weapon to use, especially at the start of the game."

"Ah. Thank you."

Ark received the weapon and checked the information window.

Rusty Iron Sword

~~One-Handed~~ Sword

~~Low Durability~~

~~Weak~~ Damage

~~Knockback~~

This weapon has low durability and the rust made its damage weak. Relying on this sword to fight in a battlefield will lead to death.

Ark was currently using a dagger with a damage of 1~3. Although it was an unnamed, lousy-beyond-compare, level 1 dagger, Ark was thankful for it. In addition, his bag was full to bursting with wolf leather and meat. On top of that, he had become more proficient with his skills. While his level stayed the same, his progress for the first day was pretty good. However, Bulma had a rather sorry expression

on her face.

“I’m sorry. Even though you suffered so much, I don’t have anything I can give you, except this”

“No, I’m truly grateful.”

There was definitely nothing wrong with looking good in front of other users.

If anything, it was good to slightly flatter users who were at a higher level than you. There was no other way to get an item at such a bargain otherwise. With those joyful feelings in his heart, Ark finished the first day of gaming.

# Mouse Hunter

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“Whew, it’s a lot easier now that I’ve actually tried it.”

Hyun Woo let out a sigh of relief as he got out of the unit.

Once again, technological advances were to be admired. The scenery, the people, and monsters in the game looked very realistic. The battles were overflowing with a sense of realism.

Although he had started playing the game for the sake of the recruitment test, he thought he might get deeply immersed and beyond. However, Hyun Woo could not afford to get blindly obsessed with the game.

The game was great, but for him, it was more important to get by. He was in a different situation compared to the other applicants. It was a given he wouldn’t be able to feed himself and pay for his mother’s hospital fees if he didn’t work. He couldn’t just give up everything and enter this 1 in 200 war with his life on the line.

‘However, the game is just as important. I can’t quit work, but, I can put the private academy on hold for the moment. Then, I suppose I can play more if I sleep less.’

The clock indicated it was already 2 in the morning.

The Hyun Woo who skipped lunch in order to set up the unit, fetched himself a carton of milk and sat in front of the computer.

He had underestimated New World.

After he had actually tried the game, he realised it was quite different from any other games. As a result, he felt the need to look up more information during his spare time.

Sure enough, within a span of a month, the game was the top topic that came up and dozens of related sites had formed.

There were sites that shared information with users; while the information was insufficient, it was good to thoroughly look over them just in case.

Hyun Woo went onto the sites and looked through the information.

However, information could only be understood if one had some background knowledge. Since he didn't know much, they were all Greek to him. At that moment, after clicking through the forums without much thought, the milk carton fell from Hyun Woo's hand.

"W-What's this?"

Hyun Woo moved his face right up to the monitor and read through the forum.

'Whoa, n-no way... Is this for real?'

Hyun Woo forgot about his fatigue and immediately entered the unit.

\* \* \*

Ark entered Harun together with a hazy light.

"Stat Window."

When Ark hastily looked at the opened Stat Window, all colour drained from his face.

"My god! I-I was done in!"

All the stats turned red and had dropped down to 1.

The information Ark saw online turned out to be true.

On the forum, there was a tale of a newbie user who died without knowing much. According to it, his stats were deducted by 1 each time he died. And like Ark, he didn't check the deducted stat and leveled up; permanently losing the stats in process. The figures inside the bracket indicated the deducted stat, and if one leveled up without recovering them, those stats could never be returned.

Ark was able to understand everything that had happened until now.

'So this was why the people around me showed extreme reactions.'

They must have thought of me as someone who had given up on the game since I kept going at it like a nutcase and everytime I died, my stats got hacked away.

Damn it, so that's why Bulma said she was so sorry.

He felt like an erupting volcano about to explode.

Ark having experience playing many games, he knew firsthand the importance of stats.

Everytime you level up in New World you are given 10 points.

This means at level 10 you should have 100 points. However Ark had already lost 84. In other words, this means at level 10 he would essentially be lower than a level 2. This was a huge difference.

No, the bad side aside, he wouldn't be able to do anything at this rate.

Before logging off, Ark was panting while holding a dagger, but he wasn't tired. He had 1 strength so the dagger was heavy, and also one agility, so his movement were sluggish.

'From the beginning that bastard Andel knew all about it. Bulma knew too. They took advantage of me in order to hunt safely. All this for a handful of crappy items.'

For 84 stat points, he got a bunch of wolf leather, meat, and a rusty sword.

Ark clenched and grinded his teeth while searching for them. However, they must've fled the village, or cut off all means of communication as he wasn't able to find them anywhere. Then again, there wasn't anything that he could do even if he caught them.

With these stats, he could not exact revenge, and they could not return his lost stats anyway. In the end, Ark sank down to the ground with a hollow expression.

Everything in front of his eyes became dark.

'Damn it, to think that such a system would exist.'

The stat couldn't fall below 1, so he really had a body that had nothing to lose now.

His anger subsided a little and his guilt rose. No matter how hurried he'd felt, he should have looked through the information first. Even 1 hour, no, 30 minutes of skimming through a forum would have prevented such a mistake. It was his fault for thinking that this game would be no different from other games.

Ark realized how much of a difference one small piece of information could make. No, but before that, the disappointment on himself surfaced.

'What a stupid bastard I was! Why didn't I notice the reason Bulma was being so kind? It may just be a game, but in the end those guys are only human. There's no reason for them to be so nice to a useless guy like me!'

If this was reality, he definitely would never have made that mistake.

'Andel and Bulma! You bastards picked on the wrong person. I'll make you regret it someday!'

Life is unfair beyond imagination. Survival would be impossible if one underestimated it.

If there was one thing Ark had learned while working hard in real life, that would be it.

Sometimes, after working a part-time job for over a month, he didn't receive his pay.

The manager had taken Ark for an easy mark because he was just a student. So Ark didn't go to school for a week and clung to the manager until he finally got his money. He couldn't give up because his life was on the line.

Ark had suffered similar situations for the past few years. He couldn't fall apart here.

He had to get stronger somehow and get his revenge on those bastards! But for now there were more urgent matters.

One hour later, Ark went and found Hansen again.

“Give me a job.”

“Hmm? If it isn't the customer who came in a while ago. Didn't you say you were going outside to hunt?”

“I'm about to cry, okay? Don't ask and please give me a job.”

Ark said as he let out a deep sigh.

He had spent an hour digging through the Internet after what had happened.

Perhaps because there were almost no idiots who had made the same mistake as Ark, there was barely any information. Still, Ark determinedly searched through the Internet.

He thought there might be a way to restore his stats if the system deduct stats with each death.

If it was impossible to restore the stats, then there'd be no reason to put the lost stat numbers in parentheses.

Thankfully, he'd was able to find information about that part a little while ago.

The way was rather simple. If you hunted a lot, the lost stats would be naturally restored. But there was also a problem here. If the lost stats were not completely restored and the user leveled up in that state, then those stats would be gone forever. Hence, he had to recover all of his 84 stat points before leveling up to level 2.

Mice naturally came to Ark's mind.

Each mouse gave 1 EXP. However, leveling up by hunting mice alone would be an impossible feat. Since many mice had to be killed in order to level up, it might be possible for him to restore many stats.

‘Although I would much rather make a new character...’

In New World, only one character was allowed per account.

Sink or swim—he had to suck it up and continue playing with his current character.. Although he was already way behind the other applicants even at the start, there was no other way.

“Okay, there aren’t a lot of people who are willing to work in this village, so there’s plenty of work I can give you. Go right now to the smithy. The number of mice these days has increased there as well.”

Ark ran right to the smithy. Then, before the blacksmith could even open his mouth, he jumped into the cellar. The situation was no better than before. At least all of his stats had been at 15 before. Now they were at a measly 1. He'd be no better than a ninety year old grandpa holding a dagger. If his Health Points had been reduced too, he'd probably have gone mad.

‘It’s fine. Let’s not think about it anymore. It’s no use coming this far and regretting it. Like when I was up against wolves, the only way is

to carefully take the mice on one by one...’

His attitude was different than before.

There was nowhere to run. If he couldn’t even kill a mouse, then he should give up on the game. Ark gave it everything that he had as he battled a single mouse. In other words, he had to give it his all to kill a single mouse. As a result, he had to investigate into a more efficient way to hunt.

While doing this, he realised he could perceive many points.

‘The speed and strength with which I can swing the dagger has definitely decreased. But the fighting experience I gained while hunting wild dogs and wolves is there to some degree. Even though it takes longer to hunt, it actually feels easier than before. That means...’

It meant combat wasn’t based on the attack and defense stats.

Similar to reality, by utilizing fighting experience, the situation could be changed at any time. It was difficult for a level one user to defeat a player who is level ten, but with a level 4 or 5, by following fighting experience, it was possible.

From then on, Ark observed the movements of the mice. He fought while learning how to move in each situation and when to hit the mouse to deal a little more damage. He went through similar battles such as this several times and grasp the techniques of the mice.

‘Okay, it’s not going to work if I just randomly swing the dagger. The mouse is using its head to move. So, I should learn its movements as if I’m facing a real mouse.’

Ark dealt with all of the mice in the smithy’s cellar.

Even so, there weren’t any changes to his stats yet.

"Even though I've killed thirty of them.... Is it truly possible to recover my lost stats like this?"

Although he had his worries, he had no other choice.

Even if he were to go outside the village, it would be difficult to deal with one rabbit. There was likely no one who would allow him to squeeze into a party.

If he wasn't able to restore his stats with the mice, the game would end then and there.

'I gotta believe they'll be restored. They'll be recovered for sure.'

Ark received his ten pieces of wheat bread from the smith and received another request. This time, it was a request about the mice in the cellar of the fancy goods shop. In an hour and a half, he was able to finish three requests.

Thanks to a lot of experience, the Strength and Agility that was lost to a huge blow has been found again. Strength up by 1. Agility has been restored by 1.

The message that he longed for finally appeared. He felt happiness, but at the same time, he felt at a loss as to what he should do.

An hour and a half. He was only able to recover 2 points after an hour and a half of nonstop mice hunting. How many mice did he have to kill to recover the remaining 82 points?

'But I'll get them back no matter what it takes. I can't just start like this, with these stupid penalties.'

Ark clenched his teeth.

\* \* \*

Hyun Woo rubbed his bloodshot eyes and headed to work.

He had been able to regain only 6 points from staying up the entire night.

While he was lucky there was a way to restore his stats, thinking about the remaining 78 points he started to feel faint.

'Should I just give up on my stats and raise my level instead?'

It would cross his mind from time to time, but Hyun Woo would immediately shake his head.

Every time you increased by one level 10 stats would be granted. That fact didn't change whether he was a level 50 or a 100. Essentially, that meant that the value of stats rose with each level.

Leveling up from 1 to 10 to get the stats would probably be faster than hunting mice, but going from level 100 to 110 would take so much more effort than right now. When he took that point into account, he had no other choice but to go through this grueling process.

'Yeah, killing mice is the only way to restore my stats with the minimal risk. There are other things I can learn while killing mice.'

Hyun Woo has always lived with a positive attitude.

The reason why he didn't quit computer prep school, even though he didn't have the money to buy a single bowl of black bean noodles (jjajangmyun), was thanks to his positive mindset. He also had a great amount of patience.

[T/N: A bowl of black bean noodles costs around 5 dollars.]

Truthfully, the harsh training in reality helped him to learn a lot.

In other games, victory was split into the attack and defense stats. There was no room for any other elements. However, in New World, a real sense of fighting and experience played a major role.

The user's real strength and agility were not applied, but experience and reflex speed counted for a lot.

That is, if someone was attacked ten times with 10 points of agility, they could generally evade once. On the other hand, if they handled the situation with quick judgement, they'd be able to evade two or three out of ten times.

'This is the same concept for when I'm attacking.'

By following the enemy's movements, he maintained an advantageous distance.

It was a concept drilled into him over and over again when he learned Taekwondo a long time ago.

Of course, with an advantageous position, it was easier to avoid or counter-attack your opponent.

In New World, the rules of reality were directly applied.

It wasn't a game where you could just recklessly strike once and get hit once.

It was a big enough benefit to know that.

Hyun Woo began to exercise in his spare time from that day on.

Exercise was the best way to hone his reflexes.

The only exercise Hyun Woo could accomplish without spending any money was the Taekwondo he learned in elementary and middle school.

When he went into high school, he stopped because of examinations, but he still had the skills of a third-dan. He didn't remember everything he had learned, but it was still enough to work out by himself.

As he was cleaning out the mart cellar, he moved his body in the spare moments.

Afterward, he loosened his stiff body, stretched his legs, and did image training of fighting a bloody struggle with the mice. If he had a new thought, he adapted it in-game against the mice.

The days passed like this and he regained 30 stat points.

Even though he still had 50 points less than he'd had from the beginning, now he could fight the mice with his eyes closed.

There were approximately twenty to thirty mice to face with each quest he received, and now it didn't even take him 10 minutes to clean them up. Of course, the speed at which he received the quests increased as well.

'My thought was right after all. Ark gets stronger the more I exercise.'

Afterwards, Hyun Woo tried using his Taekwondo techniques in New World.

At first, there were a lot of awkward moments, but as he fought the mice he became more accustomed to them. And after a week, he could face two or three mice at once without the use of the dagger.

Thanks to that, he was able to save on the dagger's repair costs.

What a truly deep and complex game!

He was in the worst situation, but Hyun Woo was getting more and more fascinated with New World.

\* \* \*

'Damn it, to think that I would actually die on purpose.'

Ark grumbled to himself in his faraway mind.

A swarm of mice was pounding on him like crazy.

On the tenth day after starting to hunt mice, Ark discovered yet another problem.

Mice only gave 1 EXP. However, those points accumulated and reached 99%. Had the situation been different, he would be grinning from ear to ear, but Ark's expression was grim.

There was no way to find the stats he hadn't regained yet if he leveled up like this.

Ark was agonized about it, but he decided to pull the trigger.

It was a way in which he would die on purpose and cut his experience. Every time he died, his experience was cut by 30% and his stats by 6 points. And by killing mice he gained 3% experience per 1 stat point. Overall, by dying once and killing mice to restore his stats, he was able to earn an extra 4 points.

'I won't lose out on a single point like this!'

He already invested 10 days into regaining his stats. Thus, it was ridiculous for him to start from a state of disadvantage after all that work. No, he couldn't accept that to happen. Ark steeled his resolve and let the mice hit him to death.

Through repetitive mice hunting, he was finally able to regain 70 points in ten days.

Even so, he wasn't even a little happy.

'Even if I regain all of my points, I'll just end up where I started from. Damn it, just you wait and see! I will never forgive those bastards Andel and Bulma, who are caused all this suffering!'

Ark, who was grinding his teeth, started to show a mad glint in his eyes.

Thanks to his wish for vengeance against Andel and Bulma, he was able to stick to the arduous work of restoring his stats.

Around that time, he was able to obtain new knowledge from the game.

You have obtained a New Skill.Combat Skill (Beginner, Passive): Art of fighting utilising your fists and feet.

Fighting without equipping a weapon will not demonstrate your strength, but your evasion and accuracy will become higher. These additional benefits can be had even when using weapons.

Bare-handed striking power increased by 10%, accuracy up 3%, evasion up 3%.

‘Just like ‘Indomitable Will’, I see that if you do one thing for long enough, the skills you need will naturally be made.’

Though they called themselves information sites, they didn’t even have simple information like this. If anything, rather than proper information, there were baseless rumors that just caused confusion among the inexperienced players. Half of it was done as a joke, and the other half was meant to protect their advantageous positions. Those rumours fanned the distrust in Ark’s human form.

‘You never know, this could be a scheme unfolded by the other applicants. Those cheap bastards, it’s no good to believe the information sites too much anyways. No, you can’t even trust the other users. You have to find and learn everything by yourself.’

After the appearance of the skill, he was able to evade the mice’s attacks more when he fought with his bare hands, and it became much more comfortable to move his body. Since he gained the bonuses even when using weapons, it was an absolutely necessary skill.

Ark was becoming a famous specialty in Harun.

It was a given that people would be interested in the Ark who started killing only mice like crazy as soon as he entered the game.

Furthermore, sometimes he would even let himself die on purpose. Because there was no way they could understand his actions, people started thinking that he had gone slightly bad in the head.

They must've been really curious, but none of them mustered up the courage to approach Ark to ask him. They just mumbled amongst themselves.

“Just what is he trying to do by killing mice which doesn’t give much experience or money?”

“There’s no way he’s trying to level up by catching mice, right?”

“Sure enough, if he’s killed many, he should have already gone up at least 3 levels.”

“But sometimes he dies, too.”

“It’s probably that he didn’t know better in the beginning and died and is doing this to regain his stats.”

Somebody’s words caught people’s attention.

“There’s a way to restore lost stats?”

There were still more people who didn’t know than those who did.

“Yes, in the case of high levels, it takes such a long time to level up so most people regain their stats by the time they level up. But at low levels, leveling up is fast so if you hunt outside, it’s easy to pass to the next level without regaining the stats. That’s why he’s only catching mice.”

“But that person has already been catching them for more than ten days. Just how many did he lose....”

“You’re right. Usually after that much one would just give up. He’s awfully determined.”

However, their talk did not reach Ark's ears.

There was no reason to listen to other people because he had a definite goal. And now simply clearing the mice had another meaning other than regaining stats. The fighting senses he had familiarized his body with so far was invaluable if only for the experience.

"Ah ah, how long has it been since I received such warm help, now I can die without regrets."

"Do not say such weak things. You have to live long and healthy."

As Ark held the grandma's hand tightly and said that, the information window appeared.

You have learned a new skill. Nursing (Beginner, Active): You can give patients hope by restoring their vigor and courage.

You give the patient an increase of 20% in vigor and courage by using this.

Mana use: 10

When Ark had completed the mouse-catching quest hundreds of times. Hansen sometimes gave him other quests, but they weren't impressive enough to make his ears perk up.

"You know granny Johansson, right? That granny might die soon. They say they need to find someone to take care of her for a day. If it's you, I can trust and leave her to you."

"The restaurant is crowded these days, so they need some helping hand. If it's you, then I can entrust you with the job."

For the most part the jobs were small like this. Honestly, he wanted to pass on them, but Hansen only gave quests one at a time.

Whether he liked it or not, in order to receive the mouse catching quests, he had to complete those job quests as well. However, it was not always a bad thing.

For one, these quests had better pay. The pay was as much as one silver.

The repair cost for the rusted sword and leather clothes was 30 copper, and wheat bread cost 5 copper.

To Ark, 1 silver was not a small sum.

On top of that, he learned skills as well.

Well, they were insignificant skills he may or may not have a use for, but there was nothing wrong about expanding his skills. He was at the level where he could catch mice while taking breaks.

Thanks to the quests, his intimacy with the NPCs of Harun rose a lot.

Whenever he crossed the streets, NPCs started conversations with him, and the price of wheat bread and repair fees dropped by an enormous amount.

“S-Sorry to trouble you, but could you buy 100 pieces of wheat bread from me?”

“I am looking to repair a weapon...”

In the case of long swords, the repair cost exceeded a silver piece.

But when Ark gave them his sword, he only paid 70 copper pieces to get it repaired.

In this valley of beginners, 30 copper was a big sum. So quick, observant users did business with the merchants through Ark. Of course, Ark didn't offer this service for free.

The price was 20% of the trade. This was Ark's proposal.

“Instead of one silver, you know that there is a 20 copper service fee?”

“Can’t I give it to you next time? I only have 10 coppers.”

“No. Come next time.”

“You’re too much. It’s only 10 coppers.”

“If it’s stingy, then sir, raise your reputation in Harun village. If you do about one hundred mice-catching quests, then the price should go down some. Well, your level won’t rise though.”

“I’ll definitely pay you back next time.”

“I only believe in money.”

“... Here’s the money.”

At the sight of the offered 10 coppers, whose existence had been denied again and again, Ark snorted.

For the second time, he decided not to trust users.

On the day when Ark first came into New World and acted thoughtlessly, two thousand other applicants started the game at around the same time.

They were all his rivals. There was no doubt that there had been competitors in Harun.

‘There’s a chance Andel and Bulma were candidates. No, I don’t know about Bulma, but Andel definitely is one.’

Andel had gotten Ark into this mess. If Andel had figured out that Ark was an applicant, then that was the definite choice. The decisive and easiest way to stand on top of all the competition is to push off your opponents.

And most applicants probably had the same thoughts.

‘I, too, will now do the same without hesitation if given the chance.’

In the end, the game was like reality, a struggle for existence. He’d

paid a price to realise his ignorance, but it was a relief that he'd come to know it sooner than later.

Because he wouldn't make the same mistake again.

He'd rather believe the NPCs than the competing users.

There wasn't even a need to look at the situation.

After having saved money fiercely, somewhere along the line, he had saved up a large sum of 5 gold in his bag.

There wasn't a user who had spent half a month in the village of Harun. It was the first time a user in Harun had saved 5 gold pieces. Because he'd defeated mice with constant perseverance, he had only 1 point left to restore. The problem was that his experience was at 99%...

'Do I have to die one more time?'

Now, dying wasn't even a big deal.

Ark had no intention of giving up on even one point.

In order to die yet another time, he went looking for Hansen to receive a quest

"I've completed the previous quest you gave me. Please give me another job."

But Hansen's response was strange.

Hansen looked over Ark with a peculiarly warm light in his eyes and said the following words.

"There is no longer any work to give you in this town."

"What?"

Ark was shocked.

There were no commissions? Doesn't this mean there wasn't a way to restore the remaining stat?

Just like in the past, he was still level 1. But because of his excessive fighting experience, he was confident he could knock out a Wild Dog.

But one death meant experience was cut by 30%. Because Wild Dogs gave a lot of experience, 30% exp would fill up before he could earn 6 points. In the end, it meant that even if he died fighting the Wild Dogs, he'd still lose out on points.

'I never thought these quests had a limit line.'

Even if you looked in the forums, there wasn't anything about the limit of requests in beginning villages. Although he hadn't counted, Ark had done over three hundred quests so far. Ark had also thought there were unlimited quests. To suddenly say there were no quests...

'Do I have to end it here and start with 1 point missing?'

It was similar to having something stick out like a sore thumb. If there were a lot of points missing, then he would simply overlook and ignore it. However, giving up with a single point missing didn't sit right with him.

At that moment, Hansen suddenly grasped Ark's hand and opened his mouth.

"Until now, I have seen a great amount of people in this place, but there has never been anyone who gave as much as you have for the village. I am touched."

'Well, that's pretty obvious. Are you nuts? Who would repeat these types of quests over 300 times?'

Ark was enraged but put a tight clamp on his anger and awkwardly

tried to laugh.

“This place is like my home. If it’s something I can do, of course I have to help out. It hurts my heart that there isn’t anything else I can help with.”

His intimacy with Hansen was already at its maximum. Though there wasn’t anything that would come of it, there was no need to cut down the intimacy he’d raised.

This was something he’d felt so far while playing New World. The NPCs talked and acted like real people. It was rumoured, each and every one of the NPCs globally could think independently like real people.

It was a given that they worked in the day and slept at night. There were even times when they caught sick and didn’t open shop.

There were cases of them interacting with users and deciding the user needed to learn to speak more politely, which caused the intimacy to drop and their prices to rise.

“Don’t you think there might be some other kind of job? I want to help so badly I’m going crazy.”

“No, this is plenty now. You didn’t look over anyone with contempt and worked without rest for this frontier village. You even went as far as to have several near-death experiences. I know it all. You are already a hero in this village. And I, with the feeling that I have nurtured you, venture to call you this. You are a Mouse Hunter!”

Suddenly, as cheerful music flowed forth, the information window appeared.

You have received Harun Village’s Elder Hansen’s title of Mouse Hunter. You are recognized as a specialist at dealing with mice. When facing mice your attack power increases by 30%. When facing mice the chance of critical hits rises by 20%. The chance of evading mouse attacks rises by 20%.

\*The received title increases all stats by a bonus of 1.

\*Fame increases by 50.

You have learned a new skill. Spirit of the Cat (Beginner, Active): A cat's roar which, in the eyes of mice, will cause them to tremble in terror.

30 second paralysis. Attack and defense (Fighting Morale) decreases by 20% (Only applies to mice).

Mana consumption: 80

In a moment Ark's downcast face immediately brightened.

The ability to deal harder blows to mice made him happy, if nothing else. The important thing was the all stats +1! He had received an unimagined bonus. At the same time, he must have received a few experience points because the accumulated 99% experience had disappeared and gained a level.

Ark hastily opened his status window and confirmed it. Every stat was fixed at 16, and only his intelligence stayed at 15. In the corner, he saw the sparkling 10 points he'd won through leveling up.

'This kind of windfall...!'

Ark was smiling from ear to ear.

Now, Ark was no longer behind a stat point, and he was 5 points ahead of other people. This was an enormously difficult achievement.

Until now, there were almost no known ways to raise stats besides leveling up.

There were rumours which said if you did some layered quests or were bestowed with a title, stats would increase. However, there was no detailed information available, but Ark, who was still level 1 and in the beginner town, had gained a bonus of 6 points.

‘Repeating the mice hunting quests 300 times paid off!’

He felt a tingly sense of delight. At the same time his hardships immediately melted away. Ark left the information window up for the moment and wondered.

He was worried about where to distribute the newly attained stats. Because he didn’t yet know what his profession was going to be, he had to be careful with the distribution. In the end, Ark invested all the points in agility, as he’d previously planned.

Agility was, for the most part, a stat most professions needed. As it was a good thing that beginners invest all their points in agility, Ark came to a conclusion.

‘There, now I should be able to leisurely start hunting Wild Dogs.’

Ark was just about to turn his body away, while wearing a satisfied smile.

“But hey, don’t you perhaps have any thoughts of trying a new job?”

“What? Didn’t you say there wasn’t any work?”

“No, well, it’s not village work, but there’s a job that bothers me a little...”

Ark turned around with an interested expression.

Until now, he hadn’t heard about anyone receiving a quest from Hansen besides the village ones. Nonetheless, after completing over three hundred mice assassination quests, Ark had also received only village quests. However, for the first time, he had received a different commission from Hansen.

‘Is it a quest available only after you’ve received the Mouse Hunter title?’

So to speak, it was the first. It was a given he was interested. Having already received a title and bonus stats, he was so happy he could hardly contain it. Ark quickly replied to Hansen.

“If it’s Grandpa’s request, I’ll do any work no matter what it is.”

“Thank you. But to be honest, even I can’t make a judgement on what this opportunity is. I’m not sure how dangerous it will be either. This was the reason why I couldn’t bring it up until now. Anyway, if you are willing to do it, look for the bar owner, Kraydon, and ask for the details.”

The Bar Owner Kraydon’s WorriesThe bar owner Kraydon has been agonizing over a new worry for several days.

Meet him and listen to his situation.

Level of Difficulty: —

“I will go look for him right away.”

Ark bowed and set off for the bar.

“Oh, Ark. As expected, it’s you who came.”

Kraydon greeted him with a welcoming voice.

Ark was probably the first user he’d called by name.

“Yes. Hi, how are you? So, I heard there’s some kind of problem?”

“Indeed. No, no there isn’t. To be honest, it’s not enough to call it a problem... Over the past few days I’ve been hearing some strange talk.”

“Strange talk?”

“As you know, mice have continued to appear no matter how many you’ve killed recently. You should know how much I suffered because of that, right?”

‘I’m the one who suffered. While receiving just 10 pieces of bread.’

Ark had a fit of anger, but on the surface he laughed naively and nodded his head.

“I know. But isn’t it okay these days?”

“It’s a little quieter. However, only a few days ago, I heard some strange talk from some guests. You know the Harilal mountain in this area, right? While crossing that mountain, they discovered a strange cave. Do you know what they said was inside the cave? The vile mice. They said a really unbelievable number of mice were living there.”

“Then has that swarm of mice been coming to the village from that cave?”

“There’s a high possibility that’s the case. But if tourists’ words were true, we should take action.”

Kraydon scratched his beard and gave Ark a look.

It was a look that hoped Ark would look into the details.

“Is it fine if I investigate that cave?”

“That’s right. If it’s the one who received the title of Mouse Hunter, I can entrust it to you.”

This guy can spread rumours throughout town quickly.

“Ok, I’ll take a look at once.”

Ark accepted without much thought. Then, his request window changed to ‘Unknown Cave Exploration.’ The difficulty level rose from ‘—’ to ‘G’ but he didn’t pay much attention to it. In the information he’d looked up, G difficulty quests were about the level of catching Wild Dogs.

"I'm thankful. Since I've found out the approximate area, I'll mark it on your map."

After Kraydon had finished what he was saying, the map window spread out.

The enormously large map was mostly black, and only the areas surrounding Harun were lit up. In the inner part of the Harilal mountain chain surrounding the village, there was a blinking light. As expected, it was an area that he'd never seen even once in the information sites.

So to speak, it was a hidden dungeon!

It was common knowledge that dungeons were treasure houses for items.

Although because it was a G difficulty quest in a beginning village he could not hope for an impressive item, for Ark who was equipping a rusted sword, even a single broken shield would be a big treasure.

Above all, discovering a dungeon no one else knew about held an impressive sense of achievement.

Ark then left the bar in a hurry to prepare for his journey.

'I guess I should organize these now.'

There were a lot of odds and ends filling up his bag.

The 3 leathers and meat he'd gained while catching wolves and the 10 wheat breads he'd gained each time he completed one of three hundred mice-killing quests.

At first, he had eaten them as he'd received them, but after he started killing mice with ease the wheat breads accumulated. It was to the point that he would eat 1~2 of them when his satiety dropped all the way to the bottom.

And so after a while he had accumulated over 1000 wheat breads.

Even though they were stored by 100 pieces each, there wasn't any room for other items.

'I'll leave 100 pieces securely in my bag and let's sell the rest.'

Ark went to the General Merchandise store and sold his wheat bread. Originally the wheat bread was a product that couldn't be sold once it was bought.

But thanks to his maximum intimacy, there was no impossibility for Ark. Each wheat bread was worth 1 copper piece.

Of course, if he'd sold them to users, he'd receive 2 copper pieces, but he couldn't not afford to waste time for just a copper piece difference. For Ark, who only had a limited time to play the game, time was of the essence.

Selling 2000 wheat breads yielded 20 silvers.

Ark used that money to repair his equipment and left for the Harilal mountains.

~~Health~~  
~~Health~~  
~~Strength~~  
~~Wisdom~~  
~~Intelligence~~

---

# First Dungeon

\*Yowwwl!\*

With a yelp, the Wolf's body was split in half.

The bodies of the Wolves slowly turned into fragments, dropping leather and meat.

Ark gathered the spoils and opened his Status Window.

"Looks like I can deal with a Wolf without too much of a problem."

Even after receiving the request, Ark didn't immediately head off to the cave.

Although the dungeon was supposedly in the area around the starting village, a level two player couldn't be conceited enough to stroll up and down wherever he wanted. There was no knowing what dangers there might be.

The bitter experience of death penalties was a mistake Ark did not want to repeat. Therefore, he could only be at ease by gaining some levels before reaching the cave.

On the second day of dedicating himself to hard-core hunting, Ark finally reached level 5.

He invested all of the stat points from level 3 into Agility, and then raised his strength to increase his attack power. Lastly, he put 10 points into Stamina to increase his Health. Since every point of Stamina raised his Health by 5, it was now at 155.

This may be obvious, but Ark had become much stronger.

At first, his life had gone down by 30 when he was scratched by a Wolf, but now it was down to about 20. Besides, he had gained exceptional fighting experience from defeating at least ten thousand Mice!

If he was lucky, he could kill one Wolf after losing only 70 Health. It was something normal users at level five couldn't even be able to imagine.

As he hunted the way he wanted without a hitch, his confidence also rose.

'Should I slowly head over to the cave now?'

Ark rose from his seat. Only 30 wheat breads were left out of the 100 he had prepared.

He drank water whenever needed, but he had been hard-pressed to do so with the wheat breads.

If his satiety dropped to below 50, his stats temporarily fell.

'There are good points to learning how to cook...'

In New World, the art of cooking was its own skill.

If the Cooking skill rose, it wasn't just the decreased fullness and Stamina that could be restored, but Strength and Stamina could also be temporarily raised. Additionally, a realistic taste could be savored. That's why everyone wanted to learn the Cooking skill.

Nevertheless, Ark still had no thoughts of learning to cook.

To learn a manufacturing skill, you have to meet the Master Artisan NPC, and the Cooking Master was in a faraway place. There would probably be an opportunity to learn it someday, so there was no

reason invest the time to travel all the way there. Just learning the cooking skill didn't mean he'd be able to immediately make luxurious dishes. He wouldn't even be able to afford the ingredients to cook the luxury food.

There was also the inconvenience of having to carry the necessary ingredients. The bag Ark had gotten when he'd started was all he had, so he didn't have much storage space. He couldn't afford to carry cooking ingredients.

It was definitely a vital skill, but there was no need for him to go through hell just to learn it early game.

'In any case, wheat bread is good enough for now. Since I have 30 wheat breads left, it should be enough for a round trip to the cave.'

Ark checked his map and began aggressively looking for the cave. He had already ventured deep into Harilal Mountain while hunting Wild Dogs and Wolves. The entrance to the cave was not far.

He followed the mountain slope, and after 30 minutes of walking, a copse of old oaks emerged. His eyes picked up the cleverly hidden cave entrance within the copse.

As soon as Ark put one foot into the cave, a sound effect similar to a sonorous shout rang out as the information window surfaced.

You have discovered a suspicious cave with an acrid smell and eerie chills flowing out of the deep and dark cave in the Harilal mountain range.

You can feel that old secrets are being treasured here.

– You have discovered a dungeon no one has found until now.

Because you are a new explorer, if you register yourself in the Hall of Fame you will gain 500 experience and 50 fame.

Will you like to register?

"I refuse." Ark replied without hesitation.

He had to hunt at least ten Wolves to get 500 experience. If he

registered the cave in the Hall of Fame, a lot of people would find out about it.

For an undiscovered cave like this, there was no knowing what secrets or items might be waiting.

The greatest advantage of a newly discovered dungeon was that he could monopolise it. He hadn't scouted it yet, and there was a high chance that a higher level user might beat him to the punch.

On the New World home page, there were simple-minded users who uploaded dungeon item lists and many others who laid in wait while biding their time.

'I'd rather kill ten Wolves than to register this cave in the Hall of Fame.'

Once again, he was glad that he had done a lot of research.

If he'd come here without knowing anything like the first time, he would've thoughtlessly registered it in the Hall of Fame.

However, Ark was not the insipid person he used to be. It was common sense for him to be more cautious and alert than monsters, NPCs or even other users.

'Now, what exactly is in here.'

Ark controlled his trembling excitement and stepped into the dungeon.

The smell of something rotting was overflowing with realism and stimulated his senses. It was so strong and terrible that he wondered if there really was a need to make even smells so *real*.

It happened when Ark had walked 100 meters into the cave.

Suddenly, his foot sank into something squishy. Startled, he jumped

and felt the ground wriggle and climb up. In another moment, the image of the blackness swallowing him flashed into his mind and he lashed out.

“Wha-What’s all this? Don’t tell me they’re all Mice?”

Ark turned pale with fright. The things that were crawling up from the ground were all Mice. That was not all. He hadn’t noticed it until now, but the pitch black Mouse swarm was covering the entire cave.

Every time the Mice moved, it was like a wriggling wave over the whole cave.

The Mice emitted a terrible bloodthirst that made his spine go cold. The courage he had dedicated himself to raising was no use. Ark urgently flailed in the darkness. With one blow, a number of Mice went flying away and rolled onto the ground. That was thanks to the Mouse Hunter title he’d received, which raised his attack power and chance of critical hits.

‘Hmph, do you know how many Mice I’ve killed until now?’

Once he saw how big of an effect his one blow had, his fear dissipated.

No matter how many there were, in the end they were just Mice. With the attack bonus, even if he didn’t land a critical hit, there was no need for a second blow.

Without rest, Ark mowed down the Mice that were coming at him from all sides.

However, the number of Mice did not seem to decline.

‘Damn, if it goes on like this there’ll be no end. I have to run away.’

“The Spirit of the Cat!”

Nyaaaaaaaaaaaaa-!

Although he had learned it, he hadn't actually thought that he'd be able to use it. Anyway, the Spirit of the Cat demonstrated an absolute effect on the Mice.

As soon as Ark used the skill, a splittingly searing cat's cry pierced the air and the shape of a black cat appeared above his head. Upon seeing the cat's flashing eyes, the Mice were paralyzed with fear.

In that space of time, Ark cut down the Mice in his path and escaped to the outside of the cave.

Although the paralyzing effect on the Mice wore off quickly, they didn't chase him out of the cave.

"Phew, what a relief."

Outside, Ark ate wheat bread and drank water to restore his stamina.

For there to be an innumerable swarm of Mice... It was truly a dizzying experience.

'But I can't just give up like this.'

Ark checked his quest window.

The quest hadn't been updated yet. That meant he had to go in further. No, quest aside, he already had experience hunting tens and thousands of Mice. It would be stupid of him to give up on the quest just because the cave was infested with Mice.

'I charged right in since it was my first time and didn't know a thing, but I should be fine if I calmly work my self forward from the entrance.'

Ark entered the cave, cleared about one hundred Mice, and retreated. After doing this cycle three or four times, a sound effect rang out and

a message window popped up.

You have learned a new skill.

Sword Mastery (Beginner, Passive): You have taken the first step towards being a Swordsman.

From now on, whenever you wield a sword, all penalties received shall disappear.

You can now use your sword as an extension of your own hand. You have become more skilled with connecting your sword skills to circumstances when you use them with other skills.

You will gain bonus attack power, based on your sword skill level.

\*It has become possible to use the effect of 'Swordsmanship' as a combo, with Hand-to-Hand Combat. (Swordsmanship follows the levels of Sword Mastery and Hand-to-Hand Combat and rises accordingly.)

'Sword Mastery has finally appeared.'

When he was hunting in the village, it was almost always with bare hands. It had been a waste to use the sword to kill the Mice and have to pay the repair fee. That's why Sword Mastery, a skill that other users would have gained first, had only just appeared. However, it was fortunate that he had learned Sword Mastery later.

When he was first catching the Mice, Ark hadn't known about the existence of a separate Sword Mastery skill. If he had known, he probably would have used his sword despite the repair fees.

But because he hadn't known, he had continued to fight with his bare hands. Thanks to that, he had been able to learn Hand-to-Hand Combat. Although Hand-to-Hand Combat was a bare-handed skill, the bonuses applied slightly to every weapon he used.

The bonuses from Sword Mastery- if they were combined with the bonuses from Hand-to-Hand Combat, then in actuality his attack power was raised by 1.5 times. That was an effect he was able to feel right away.

'Moving is very comfortable!'

Although he was wielding a sword there were no breaks in his movements

The attacks flowed like water!

Thanks to the effect of Sword Mastery, while he was wildly swinging his sword, he was also able to perform kicks. The skill that had been impossible until a little while ago had become possible. And without resting, he was able to ward off the attacking swarm of Mice.

'So I see that if a related skill is learned, then new abilities form too!'

For the Hand-to-Hand Combat he had regarded as trivial to be so useful was something he hadn't imagined.

When his combined attacking power rose, he's hunting speed rose exponentially.

With a full health bar, he was able to hunt two hundred Mice with ease.

After going into the cave five or six times like that, the entrance to the cave was jet-black with Mouse corpses. To make a rough estimate, a thousand of them had fallen over and died.

He had killed so many that his level had gone up to 6 as well.

Ark pushed past the disgusting Mouse corpses and went into the cave.

Just then, something deep within the cave sparkled.

When he got closer and looked, it was a body with only bones left.

If a user dies, his corpse disappeared with his revival.

'So that must mean this is the corpse of an NPC.'

Then there was a big possibility that his quest information would be

updated.

Ark sifted through the remains and discovered a small piece of parchment on the inside.

It may have been something the corpse had written; there was minute handwriting written on the surface.

– ‘Unfortunate Traveler’s left-behind piece of parchment’ has been acquired.

3 years have passed since I received Sir Viscount Havestone’s command and set out searching for its trails. And with divine intervention, I was able to find what I was searching for by pure chance. But to think such an unimaginable demon would be living within the cave.

I was extremely caught off guard. If *that* was here, then I should have definitely anticipated trouble... Everything is my fault. Because I’ve already come carelessly into the cave, I’ve suffered a huge wound. Is the Viscount’s desire going to come to an end like this?

I am so bitter. It’s regretful but the secret within the darkness of this cave will be...

Whatever was written in continuation of the parchment had been gnawed away by Mice.

‘I can smell that there’s more to this somewhere.’

As he’d thought, the cave wasn’t simply a Mouse cavern.

He couldn’t understand the contents of the parchment, but there was definitely something inside the cave. The probability that the mentioned ‘that’ was an item was high. Ark’s motivation swelled inside him. He tucked the parchment away and continued into the cave.

“Euurgghh!”

With one blow, Ark threw three or four Mice to the floor.

There were only Mice within the cave. The Mice at the entrance had been nothing. Wherever he went, there were Mice running at him from all directions.

The number of Mice that were cut down and cut again seemed to increase more and more. But who was Ark? In Harun, he had cleared hundreds of Mice requests, and he had struck down as many as one thousand Mice and had earned the title of Mouse Hunter.

"You bastards, today you've really met your match. SPIRIT OF THE CAT!"

He may have been driven into a corner, but at least there was no risk of death.

When it became dangerous, he immediately used the Spirit of the Cat to paralyze the Mice and escaped from the cave.

Ark crazily ran in and out of the cave and slowly stepped further and further into the cave. After 3 hours had passed, yet another problem emerged.

'I underestimated it because it was just a beginner dungeon, but it's deeper than I thought. But I only have 10 wheat breads left now.'

The problem was the wheat bread. If his satiety dropped, the rate of health restoration would severely decrease. If it dropped to below half, his stats would fall temporarily, and if it fell to the zero, in the worst case scenario, he could even die. If he ran out of wheat bread, there'd be no way for him to continue exploring.

'Do I have to go back to the village and stock up on wheat bread?'

That was a problem in itself. Even if you cleared monsters, after a certain amount of time they spawned again. And the smaller they were, the faster they respawned. Though he'd advanced hundreds of meters into the cave, if he went back to the village and came back, he'd have to start from the beginning.

'I'm gonna go crazy. If I knew it'd be like this I wouldn't have sold the wheat bread....'

As Ark was having those thoughts, a brilliant plan surfaced in his mind.

'Could it be possible?'

Ark thought about it for a moment and stood up.

'Well, there's probably nothing to lose by trying.'

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\*Swish, smack!\*

Ark was struck by a Wolf wandering on the outskirts of the cave.

The Wolf snarled and leapt at him. Now, Wolves and the like were no match for Ark.

Brandishing his sword like lightning, Ark put the Wolf into a near death. But when it came to the final blow, he put away his sword. While being careful not to kill the Wolf, he controlled his strength and struck it with his foot.

\*Yelp!\*

The Wolf whimpered as he kicked it aside.

However, Ark held no mercy for it. He stared at it as it panted, when it seemed to get a little better he beat it, and after doing this for three minutes the Wolf finally went into a frenzy.

\*Awooo!\*

The forest violently shook, as the Wolf cried out with all of its remaining strength.

A dozen Wolves who heard the heartrending story of their comrade rushed out at him.

‘It’s done!’

Ark had a smile full of satisfaction on his face as he rapidly fled towards the cave.

Ark quickly used Spirit of the Cat to paralyze the Mice and went deeper into the cave. When he reached a place where there were less Mice, the paralyzation wore off and the Mice piled themselves layer upon layer on Ark.

‘I might even die if I fail!’

Ark didn’t pull out his sword and concentrated on using all his strength to evade the attacks. But because there were so many Mice attacking him, he felt as if his life was getting sucked out with a straw. To top it all, the Wolves were pitching in too, so in an instant, he was bitten an extreme number of times.

However, soon after, the Wolves stopped attacking him. The Mice had started to attack the Wolves too.

The Wolf horde was startled when the enormous swarm of Mice ran at them. However, they were Wolves; the Wolves couldn’t just tuck their tails and flee.

The Wolves bared their fangs and started attacking the Mice.

“Yes, just as planned!” Ark shouted in delight.

New World boasted a system that had few differences with reality. That meant whether they were animals or monsters, it was the same.

In fact, even when Ark came to New World, he had seen instances of Wolves catching and eating rabbits and field Mice. That meant that natural enemies applied too.

Ark, who had figured that out, had purposely gathered the Wolves and lured them into the cave.

The result was a huge success. The best, most perfect situation had opened up for Ark. In the middle of the cave, the Wolf horde were leaping and bucking and the Mice were enveloped in chaos. Since the Mice must have judged the Wolves to be more dangerous than Ark, they were all running at the Wolves.

Ark took a step back and watched the Mice and Wolves fight at his leisure. Each time his mana was restored, he used Spirit of the Cat.

After 10 minutes had passed in that manner, the Mice were almost gone.

“Hu hu hu. You did well.”

With a satisfied smile, Ark took care of the staggering Wolves.

Although they were in a dying state, the Wolves still gave the proper amount of experience.

Simply put, it was like taking a candy from a child!

To earn this unexpected benefit... It was like killing two birds with one stone.

‘Am I perhaps a genius?’

Although he’d thought of it himself, it was truly a brilliant method. There were no restrictions on what methods you used to solve a quest. You could even go as far as to kill the person who gave you the request.

Of course, in that case, the penalties attached were extreme, but the near infinite degree of freedom was one of New World’s charming centerpoints.

Even after that, Ark gathered all the Wolves in the area and had them fight with the Mice. Then he cleared off the Mice and Wolves that were left. Thanks to that, his level went up and up and he reached level 8, and although he'd only consumed 2 wheat breads, he was able to go deeper into the cave.

'This is a really deep cave. Though I think I've gone really deep into the cave, I don't see any worthwhile items... surely it's not going to end with just Mice all the way to the end?'

Bit by bit, anxiety reared his head.

It was when Ark was having those thoughts, that all of a sudden, with a *thud* sound, the Mice that had been running at him crazily, abruptly flinched and ran, scattering left and right.

'Huh? What's this?'

Ark, who had been turning his head back and forth with an incredulous look, took in a sudden breath. From within the darkness, on the other side of where the Mice had fled, were a pair of red orbs.

"W-What is this bastard?"

The slowly approaching red orbs took form.

Surprisingly, the orbs were the eyes of a Mouse.

It wasn't a Mouse the likes of which Ark had faced until now. It was easily 10 times bigger than a Wolf — a massive Mouse monster. Enraged that some bastard had intruded, it ROARED and the entire cave shook.

This terrible *fear!*

Ark's legs trembled and the strength went right out of him.

Terrified, the Wolves tucked their tails and fled out of the cave.

“Oh my god. No way, this bastard....”

Was the identity of the demon written off on the parchment this monster?

It was highly likely.

He had written that he'd gotten a fatal wound in the cave. And the place where he had died hadn't been far from the entrance. For he who had traveled a distance after receiving a command from an Aristocrat, to have been unable to escape the cave with a fatal wound... that had been an inconsistency.

‘He went all the way into the cave and met this demon. Then, while inflicted with a fatal wound, he ran away only to be attacked by a swarm of Mice, and he collapsed. That’s what happened.’

If he thought like that, there were no inconsistencies. And it was highly likely that Ark would be punished with the same fate.

The dread Ark felt when he had first met a Wolf was incomparable to the horror that drowned him now. At this critical moment, the contents of the quest were updated.

– Boss monster ‘Black Bear Mouse’ has appeared.

The quest has been updated.

Unknown Cave Exploration → The Mysterious Creature Living Within the Cave.

You discovered a massive demon Mouse while exploring the cave. There's no doubt this demon Mouse has been controlling all the other Mice.

Escape the cave quickly and tell this truth to the bar owner Kraydon.  
Level of difficulty: F

As expected, there wasn't any mention of having to kill the demon Mouse. That was probably because at his current level, that was

impossible. Moreover, just relaying the information about the demon Mouse had a difficulty level of F.

To be sure, he saw a large possibility that the pitch black Mouse swarm was going out of the cave to avoid the demon Mouse. All of the possible situations were the worst, but Ark's eyes were actually glowing instead.

'Then that means this Mouse is an lump of experience and items!'

His greed exceeded his horror.

An avaricious light sparkled in Ark's eyes.

A boss monster was no different from a treasure chest that gave all adventurers the honor of finding it!

It was the first boss monster he'd met. He couldn't just withdraw without fighting it.

'Running away is gonna be tough anyways. Then let's see, let's find out how strong you are and fight once!'

Ark courageously raised his sword and charged. However, in the next moment, his expression changed to one of embarrassment. He had swung the rusted sword with all his strength, but the demon Mouse didn't even register the blow.

The thick leather covering the body had deflected the sword.

\*Squeek, kiayaa!\*

The huge Mouse lashed out with its front paw.

When he blocked it with his sword, his palm throbbed from the impact.

'Oh my god, I blocked it with my sword but my stamina was still cut!'

A full bite from a Wolf cut his health by 30 points. Even though he'd blocked the attack from the demon Mouse, 30 health had been cut away. If he was really hit, he wouldn't be able to endure two or three hits.

"Damn it, Spirit of the Cat!"

Nyaaaaaaaaaaa!

When Ark used this as the last measure, the regular Mice were paralyzed. Shortly after, the demon Mouse roared and the Mice quickly regained consciousness.

'Oh my god, Spirit of the Cat doesn't work!'

Ark completely lost his previous ambition and turned his body away. In that moment, the Mouse swarm attacked him from all directions. While Ark was struggling in the Mouse swarm, a heavy blow connected with his back and pain exploded.

You have been stunned. All movements are blocked for five seconds.

Immediately, his health was cut by 50 and his consciousness became fuzzy. Before his consciousness could return, he was hit by another attack. At last his health reached rock bottom, and Ark collapsed to the floor.

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"Damn it!"

Ark fumed and went inside the bar.

After the demon Mouse's attacks, Ark lost his life. When he opened his eyes, he was back at the Quartermaster at the entrance of Harun village. However, the quest had updated, he had to stop by the tavern to give necessary reports.

“Oh! Ark, you have returned safe and sound!”

As per usual, Kraydon greeted Ark gladly.

Ark immediately took a look around and shut his mouth before giving his report.

Inside the tavern, some users were sitting and eyeing them. Because Ark did not want anyone else to know about the existence of the cave, he called Kraydon out to the warehouse.

Kraydon’s face turned pale after Ark had told him what he had encountered inside the cave.

“The cave has been inhabited by a terrifying monster.”

“If that’s the case, this is no time to be standing around like this. Before the bastard comes and brings danger to the village, we have to tell Lord the truth. I’ll also ask him to send soldiers at once, to deal with the bastard.”

“Ah, you can’t!”

Ark shouted indignantly.

“What? Why not? What do you mean?”

“Um... Well, you know...”

‘Damn, I shouldn’t have talked about it.’

If the Lord dispatched Soldiers, then of course the users would also come to know of it.

If that happened, Ark will no longer have monopoly over the treasures of the cave. Soldiers might take it, or give onlooking players an opportunity to take it.

That would make Ark feel jealous to death.

“That can’t happen, absolutely not! The cave is mine. Up until now, how much time have I invested in order to obtain treasures inside the cave? Now there’s one demon Mouse to kill, they can’t just come waltzing in at the last moment!”

However, he could not say his thoughts out loud.

After contemplating on what to do, Ark put his hopes on his intimacy with Kraydon and spoke.

“This is a job you requested of me. You believed in me and entrusted it to me, right? To repay your trust, I want to solve this with my own hands. So please give me a little more time. I will certainly repay your trust in me.”

“Yes, I didn’t know you cared that much about me. Of course, I believe in you. However, this isn’t a matter I can decide on by myself. The safety of the whole village is hanging on this. Even if we barely miss the timing, everything could become dangerous. I’m saying this can’t wait until you’ve become a worthy warrior.”

“I’m begging you. Give me a chance to restore my honor.” Ark said it with an imploring light in his eyes.

Truthfully, he wasn’t the type of person to say those apologetic words to anyone. However, he was facing an NPC. Even though he acted almost exactly like a human, in the end he was still a computer-generated artificial intelligence. There was no reason for his pride to turn sour over saying such sorry words to an AI.

As Ark begged pathetically, Kraydon deliberated with an uncomfortable look.

“For you of all people to say such things, I can’t stay stubborn. That this village is peaceful right now is all thanks to you, after all. Alright, then let’s do it like this. For now I’ll give you ten days. If I don’t hear from you after that, I’ll ask Lord Jackson for help. Will that do?”

“Ten days....”

One day in real life was three in the game.

So to speak, one week was three days in real life.

The time it had taken to clear the cave until now was already precious. Furthermore, to play the game he couldn't give up his job, so even if he reduced his sleeping time to the maximum, the time he had left was a little more than a day.

And Kraydon was wearing an resolute expression that said he couldn't make anymore exceptions. In the end, Ark nodded.

Though it was too much to ask... There was nothing he could do but to try.

“I understand. Let's do that to put the village's safety first.”

“I'm glad you understand. Then I'll believe and entrust this to you.”

The quest has been updated.

The mysterious organism living within the cave: After hearing about the demon Mouse in the hidden cave, Kraydon has asked you to defeat the demon Mouse.

Stipulation, this request has a time limit of ten days. If you do not clear the demon Mouse within this time, Kraydon will tell the truth to the Lord, and the request will be automatically cancelled.

Level of difficulty: + F

As he'd anticipated, the quest that involved personally slaying the demon Mouse had a ‘+’ attached to the difficulty level. ‘+’ indicated an elite quest, something that had to be completed with a party.

F difficulty level was roughly for level 15 and below. That meant that this was a request that could be resolved with a party of users at level 15.

However, when it came to parties now, Ark was the type of person to grind his teeth.

“There’s no way I’m doing it with a party!”

To be honest, it was a matter Ark had thought about often. The quest’s contents were to deal with the demon Mouse, but at his level of 8, it was impossible.

‘A week from now. I have to somehow secretly go into the demon Mouse’s cave and take the treasure.’

As long as he was able to get the treasure, whatever happened to the demon Mouse was none of his concern.

As Ark was thinking that, he turned to leave. The closely watching Kraydon abruptly asked.

“After a closer look, it seems like you don’t have many supplies left.”

“Yes, as I spent time on the cave investigation, before I knew it....”

Ark replied with the most pitiful expression on his face. He thought he might be able to receive some free wheat breads. If he could save even 1 silver, he could put on a pitiful expression any day. Then, after staring blankly at Ark’s face, Kraydon opened his mouth again.

“Do you have any thoughts of learning how to cook?”

“Cooking?”

Ark questioned with an expression that said he didn’t follow.

“Actually, at one time I went traveling to a lot of places like you. The thing that troubled me the most was the problem of food. However, even if you learn how to cook, if you don’t have the ingredients, isn’t that just useless? So in order to solve that problem, I started learning how to cook in a completely different way. It’s a cooking method that

doesn't cost money, and there's no need to carry around ingredients.”

“Does such a cooking method exist?”

It was really a sound that made his ears perk up.

“Alright, until now I haven’t found any worthy travelers, so I haven’t passed this down to anyone yet. If it’s you, who has unfailingly helped me this long with all your heart, it’s a different matter. You always carried an ample supply of bread with you, so I thought you wouldn’t need this.... if you want it, I’ll teach it to you.”

“Yes, please!”

You have learned a new skill.

Survival Cooking (Special, Beginner, Passive): The owner of the bar in Harun, Kraydon, created this original method of cooking. If you learn this skill, you can use almost every type of food found in nature as ingredients to make food. However, the result cannot be predicted.

Therefore, to find out the effects of the food, you may have to put your life on the line....

Ingredient Foraging (Beginner, Passive): You can gather a variety of food ingredients from nature.

‘Put your life on the line to discover the effect of food?’

The last part was troubling, but he was fairly satisfied with the skill. He could use all the ingredients he could find in nature to make food. Then if he just learned several recipes, he could endure for several days in remote places like the cave even without wheat bread.

Indeed, Survival Cooking had a name that suited it perfectly. For him to learn such a skill for free... NPCs had to be treated with friendliness after all.

And on top of that Kraydon pulled out a large pot and handed it to him.

“If you’re to do Survival Cooking, you’re going to need this too.”

You have acquired an iron pot for Survival Cooking.

“Thank you!”

Ark bowed and slipped out of the bar.

[T/N: In Korea, it is customary to bow to your elders when you see them and leave them.]

Because there was a schedule, he didn’t have a moment to waste. Ark immediately went to the general store and sold off all the Wolf leathers he had saved. Then he swallowed his tears and bought one recovery potion.

Until now, his spirit had somehow endured, but with the demon Mouse, he couldn’t spare money in facing it. This time, with his death he had lost 6 stats. Though he would probably be able to restore his stats killing the Mice in the cave, he didn’t have the time to waste on this again.

The price for a health potion that restores 100 life was a staggering 5 gold. Thanks to his intimacy, he only had to pay 3 gold and 50 silvers. The fortune he had accumulated bit by bit like a diligent ant was one fifth gone.

‘If I add the equipment repair fee to this....’

Automatically, he puffed out a sigh. However, Ark was resolute.

This was an investment. If he could get just one decent treasure from within the cave, even that would compensate for everything. For the last time, Ark had his rusted sword and leather clothes repaired at the blacksmith and set off for the cave again.

# Desperate Struggle with the Demon Mouse

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As Ark scaled the Harilal Mountains, he used his Foraging skill to gather all the grass and fruit he could see, cramming them in his bag.

It was so he could test out his newly learned Survival Cooking.

As he'd expected, when he arrived at the cave it was crawling with mice again. Because he had cleared the mice swarm before, he was able to recover 2 stat points in just 1 hour. However, his satiety was down to half and his health recovery rate was falling.

It was time to use his newly learned skill.

'Well, shall I just put this and that in and mix it up?'

Ark rummaged around his bag and put mushrooms and some strange looking grasses in his pot. With the Survival Cooking pot, there was no need to make a separate fire. All you had to do was put in the ingredients, and everything would be automatically heated and food would be made. He added water and after about 1 minute, an explosion suddenly erupted from the pot.

You have failed Survival Cooking. All the ingredients have been consumed.

Even after that, he tried again and again with different ingredients, but he just kept getting the failure message. Finally, with his seventh attempt, he completed a soup that radiated a fragrant smell.

You have successfully used Survival Cooking. This is a dish made with the use of Land Fruit and Cochran. However, without personally tasting it, there is no way to tell what kind of dish it is. After

confirming its taste, the recipe and its special effects will be automatically recorded in the Cookbook.

Ark quaffed a sip of the soup without a second thought.

There was a sharp feeling accompanying the food down his throat and, suddenly, his vision yellowed. The strength from his body was sucked right out. As his back helplessly twisted, his head struck the floor.

‘W-What’s going on?’

-You have been poisoned with a paralytic poison!The food you have made using Survival Cooking is ‘Fragrant Poison Soup.’The effects of being poisoned are paralysis, a decrease in satiety and you cannot move for 10 minutes. It’s better not to make this soup.

‘Holy cow, so this was what it meant by dangerous?’

Then didn’t that mean that he’d have to suffer these kinds of effects every time he made a new dish? Fortunately, he had already cleared all the wolves and mice in the area, but if he had haphazardly made the dish and eaten it, he might have even died then and there.

After groaning and moaning for 10 minutes, Ark was finally able to stand up. With a shudder, he tore into the wheat bread he had brought just in case.

“Damn, no wonder he taught me this so meekly.”

After all, life was not that easy.

\* \* \*

‘What the hell should I do with that mouse bastard?’

Hyun Woo’s mind was entirely filled with thoughts of the Demon Mouse.

It had already been two days since Kraydon had updated the quest. During the past two days, he had gone into the cave dozens of times, but he gained nothing. The cave's structure was complicated, but in the end the roads all converged into one place: the lair of the impudently resistant Demon Mouse.

He had also thought about luring the Demon Mouse to a different place and going in. However the Demon Mouse didn't move an inch from where it was planted. In the end he just wasted time in a state where he couldn't do anything. All he managed to do was to restore his cut stat points.

'Is there really nothing I can do but to give up like this?' Hyun Woo puffed out a sigh.

The deadline was until tomorrow afternoon. But since he had to go to work in the day, if he couldn't finish this up by tonight, the quest would be cancelled and the Soldiers would be on the move. The room for Hyun Woo to claim his rights would disappear.

"Eeeek!"

A shriek burst out from within the warehouse.

It was Jung Hye Sun, the night university student who worked part-time at the mart. Though she was smart enough to earn a scholarship, the reason why she was at a night university was because of family circumstances.

He hadn't heard the details, but it seemed like a tough situation.

After being awakened by cold reality, Hyun Woo had become a cynical person. He didn't even get along with his co-workers at work. There were times when he'd been cursed at for that kind of personality. Still, he wasn't like that to everyone. To the few people who truly worried about him, Hyun Woo also treated them with sincerity.

No, could it be that it was their reaction to distance themselves from

anyone they couldn't use? He had cared about those kinds of exploiters more than he needed to.

In this case, Jung Hye Sun was suffering through a plight like his own. After learning about her family situation, he had taken care of her as if it was his business to. He had taken responsibility for her mistakes, and sometimes he gave her sodas that he himself hadn't bought and drank for many years. If he'd had a little sister, it would be that feeling.

His consciousness abruptly awakened, Hyun Woo rushed to the scene.

"Hye Sun, what's going on?"

"Mouse, a mouse..."

Hye Sun, who had collapsed on the floor, pointed to an area as she trembled. As he turned his eyes towards the area, a baby mouse quickly escaped in between some boxes.

Hyun Woo watched the mouse with annoyed eyes and muttered.

"Damn, mice are a problem whether it's here or there."

"What? Are there mice at oppa's house, too?"

"No, there's something like that."

As Hyun Woo cleared away the boxes to find the runaway mouse, Hye Sun was appalled.

"Don't, don't do that. What are you going to do if the mouse comes out again?"

"It has to come out so I can knock it down."

"Oppa, aren't you even afraid of mice?"

"Scared? Of mice?"

Hyun Woo laughed. To be sure, in the past he would have been a little scared. These days, there weren't a lot of chances to see a mouse. However, now he felt no difference between a mouse and a fly.

New World's mice were more realistic than reality. He had killed ten thousand of those mice in the village and had killed thousands of them today at dawn. In addition, he was currently waiting for an opportunity to kill the Demon Mouse. Knocking down one baby mouse was no problem.

"Just wait. I'll thrash it right away."

"Don't, don't do it. I don't want to see it again. There's nothing in the world more scary than mice to me. I'm afraid just thinking of mice being here. I think I'll have to tell the owner right away and at least sprinkle some rat poison."

It was then that Hyun Woo, who was cleaning up boxes, flinched.

Hye Sun was startled and asked with a shaky voice, "What's wrong? Did the mouse come out?"

"Hye Sun, what did you just say?"

"What? That we've got to put out some mouse poison...."

"That's it!" Hyun Woo shouted while clapping his hands. "Why didn't I think of that? It'll be simple if I do that!"

Hyun Woo suddenly turned around, grasped Hye Sun's hand tightly, and shook it enthusiastically. "Thanks, Hye Sun! Thanks to you, I've finally found the way to resolve this!"

"What? What?" As Hyun Woo suddenly grasped her hand and shook it, Hye Sun turned tomato red.

\* \* \*

"Hu hu hu, you doomed mice bastards. Today is the day you bastards die."

Ark had a satisfied smile as he looked at the bubbling, boiling pot.

The tasty smelling, strongly aromatic food was Ark's masterpiece, the 'Fragrant Poison Soup.'

Ark stored enough of the completed soup into some pouches and

entered the cave. Thanks to the repeated attacks of Ark and the wolves, the cave was already mostly depleted of mice. When he reached the innermost part where the Demon Mouse was holing up inside, a great number of mice rushed at him while making menacing noises.

Ark fought the rats with his sword and entered further inside.

Grrrrrrrrr.

Within the darkness, the red lights sparkled. He had seen it so often that it didn't even occur to him to be scared. They were annoying, flashing eyes that said the Demon Mouse was there once again. Thinking the Demon Mouse was a hindrance, he went forward.

"Don't glare at me like that. Today I've come to bring you a present."

Ark strode confidently to the Demon Mouse, then grabbed and threw the pouch. The Demon Mouse reflexively swung its front paw at it and tore a large hole in the pouch, which spilled the Fragrant Poison Soup.

The Demon Mouse hesitated for a bit. However, no matter how large a mouse was, it was still a mouse in the end. There was no way it could go against its nature. After crinkling and darting its nose in and out, the Demon Mouse licked the soup.

On the outside, poisonous mushrooms are beautiful. The Fragrant Poison Soup also appeared harmless from an outward glance. The smell was incredibly good, and the taste was also alright in its own way. The soup must have been to the Demon Mouse's liking because, after eating it once, it thoroughly licked the floor. The other rats had also fallen for the seemingly harmless exterior of the soup and swarmed around.

"That's right, eat lots." Ark threw the rest of the bags with a pleased expression.

Soon afterward, the Fragrant Poison Soup finally took effect. The

greedily lapping small mice convulsed and stretched out. Then, the Demon Mouse must have sensed that something was wrong, because it cried out with a sharp sound. But by then, it was too late.

His trump card cooking was already taking effect in the Demon Mouse's stomach.

The Demon Mouse stumbled around and limply collapsed on one side. Belly-up, with its four legs pointed skywards, it started to tremble.

"Kekeke, you high and mighty mouse shit. You're no match for me. Then, shall I take a look at whatever you've been hiding? No, I should get my revenge on all the times I've suffered first, right?"

Ark hummed a song to himself as he approached the Demon Mouse. Then, in front of his eyes, a terrifying claw suddenly shot out at him. As Ark instinctively pulled out his sword and raised it, his hands shook.

"How, how could this be....!"

Ark's face went pale. The Demon Mouse he had thought was completely paralyzed had swung its front paw at him.

Something was wrong! Ark urgently turned his body to run away. However, the Demon Mouse had already blocked half of the exit with its body.

'Damn it, am I going to die again?'

Just then, when a hopeless expression surfaced on Ark's face, the Demon Mouse breathed hoarsely and wobbled as it stepped towards him.

'No, the drug is working. It's just that in comparison to its body mass, the drug dose was too small, so the effect is weaker.' His thoughts racing, a light flashed in Ark's eyes.

New World wasn't a game where you could simply hit and slash anyways. How well he could handle a fighting situation was also important. So there was no reason why he couldn't handle a Demon Mouse that had consumed a paralyzing drug and couldn't properly steady its body. In addition, Ark was already at a state where he had achieved level 10.

"Alright, then even if I die, I'll see this to the end!" Ark brandished his sword and began to attack the Monster Rat.

Maybe it was the effect of his level ups, or because of the paralysis, but his attacks were received differently than before. Every time Ark swung his sword, blood spurted out and the Demon Mouse staggered. However, Ark didn't hurry.

'The drug effect lasts for 10 minutes anyway. There's no need to rush.'

Ark circled around the mouse and while ceaselessly thrusting his sword. The Demon Mouse brandished its front paw several times, but it lacked the power from before. Ark was usually able to slide past the attacks without difficulty.

However, the system was set up so that avoiding every attack was impossible. As time passed, the injuries on Ark's body grew and his health fell. After 5 minutes of attacking, the Demon Mouse's body turned reddish.

'It's in critical condition! I can see the end at last!' The critical condition was a phenomenon that appeared after the health was down to 1/10.

Ark pushed the Demon Mouse with more boldness. But when his victory was almost assured, the Demon Mouse suddenly howled and sprang to its feet. Its front paw flew towards him with a speed incomparable to before.

"The hell, wh-what's going on?" Ark barely managed to block the attacks and looked at the Demon Mouse with a devastated

expression.

There were still 3 minutes to go until 10 minutes was up. But the paralysis must have completely worn off because the Demon Mouse was charging at him with full speed.

With one blink of the eye, Ark had been forced to go on defensive.

It was too much to defend against, let alone attack. He saw his health dropping each time he blocked an attack. After blocking about ten attacks, the sword shattered.

The rusted iron sword's durability has reached 0 and it has broken.

'Damn it!'

At last, even the sword he'd believed in disappeared.

His remaining health was 23. Ark hurriedly downed the health restoration potion. However, the Demon Mouse didn't miss that action and struck out with its front paw, hitting Ark's chest. Fortunately, since he had used the health potion, his life was barely saved, but the situation was grim. Like the Demon Mouse, Ark's body entered critical condition and his body became red.

'Damn, what kind of situation is this...'

As he dodged the front paw that kept flying at him, Ark exploded in rage. Now he could only endure one hit, at best. If a second hit flew out at him, his cold head would undoubtedly hit the floor.

'No, that can't happen! If I give up here, then I have to give up this dungeon! If I'm to die, then I might as well bite the bullet! You damn mouse shit, I'll take you down with me!'

Ark flung himself at the Demon Mouse. The front paw flew out and smacked his chest, but Ark didn't withdraw. With all his strength concentrated on one hit, his fist struck the bastard's forehead.

With your Indomitable Will, you have found the Demon Mouse's weakness. You have dealt a fatal blow.

In that moment, along with the flashing message, the Demon Mouse's movements just... stopped.

The Demon Mouse reared, heaved a steaming breath, and collapsed with all its limbs splayed out. Then, the Demon Mouse's appearance slowly turned transparent. With that, his situation became clear.

It was Ark's victory!

"Is, is this it?"

As if to confirm his thoughts, there was a pleasant sound that accompanied his 1 level up.

His legs belatedly began to tremble, as though he had cramps. As he struggled to raise his head, his life was at just 2. While on the verge of death, in critical condition senses his attack power and chance of critical hits had risen. In addition, his Hand-to-Hand Combat skill's hit chance and evasion added up so the damage he'd taken was a minimum, he was able to drag out the maximum damage for a miraculous victory.

"Ah, now isn't the time to be standing around!" Ark, who was absent-mindedly staring at the Monster Rat for a brief time, suddenly raised his head.

There were still hundred-odd mice still left in the cave. If the paralysis wore off on the mice while his health was at rock bottom, he'd be finished then and there. Ark straightened and glared fiercely at the mice.

"Hey, you little mice shit! Shall I make you pay for all suffering you caused?"

Fear flashed into the eyes of the shivering, convulsing mice.

\* \* \*

“Now, shall I take a look at the spoils?”

Ark, who had completely trampled and killed all hundred-odd mice, checked the spoils the Demon Mouse had dropped. But his expression quickly turned to one of disappointment. The Demon Mouse he'd finally killed after escaping the throes of death multiple times hadn't dropped items that were as good as he'd hoped.

There was only a thick leather and a worn sword.

Black Bear Mouse Leather (Ingredient)The leather of the Demon Mouse, who watched over numerous mice inside the mysterious cave. It is strong enough to block a decent sword, and its ability to block the cold is excellent. It can't be simply used, but if it is processed well, it looks like it can make quality armor.

“Armor... this looks pretty useful, huh?”

“I guess I can't use this.”

Ark shook his head, crestfallen. Even the Rusted Sword had 5~8 attack power. The Corroded Sword was much weaker than that. But it was too early to be disappointed.

There was still the dungeon's treasure that the Demon Mouse had protected. With high hopes, Ark went to the back of the cave. However, even when he'd arrived at the dead end, he couldn't see a worthwhile item anywhere.

“What, what's this? Surely that's not all?” Ark muttered with a dumbfounded face.

Then, as he was turning to go, something caught on his foot.

He looked down to find a slate with a chipped corner. When he lifted

the slate, the information window popped up.

You have acquired a mysterious slate.

The quest information window popped up.

### The Secret of the Mysterious Slate

You have obtained the slate the Demon Mouse was guarding in the cave. It is an enigmatic slate containing a secret. The surface is covered with unknown characters. It appears that this is the item the dead person in the entryway was looking for. It would be good to deliver this to whoever needs it.

Difficulty: F

‘A quest item! Then is this connected to another quest?’

If that was the case, then this wasn’t a bad ending. It was a quest that linked with the original, after all. The task was from the single story of the linked quests. Though it would take a lot of effort and time, there were many cases of people resolving them to the end and earning a high level item.

It was too early to throw away his hopes on getting rich quick.

\* \* \*

“W-What did you say? Did you say that you really got rid of the Demon Mouse?” A surprised Kraydon asked while looking at Ark.

Ark nodded grandly and showed him the leather.

“If it’s this big of leather, then it’s definitely the Demon Mouse. Very impressive.”

You have dealt with the Demon Mouse! The quest is completed.

With a drumming sound he hadn’t heard in ages, the quest was completed.

Your level has risen.

His level went up by 2 at the same time, bringing him up to level 13. Since he had resolved a quest that was impossible for a level 10 player, the rewards were that much greater. That was not all. As a reward, Kraydon gave him 10 Gold and told him to go to Hansen.

As soon as Hansen saw Ark, his spittle flew as he congratulated him. "I heard the news. You accomplished a truly huge feat! Since you gallantly stood against the colossal Demon Mouse and knocked it down, I can safely call you Mouse Master."

You have received Harun Village's Elder Hansen's title of Mouse Master.

You have now become an expert at dealing with mice. When fighting mice, your attack power increases by 50%. In front of mice, the chance of landing a critical hit rises by 40%. Because you have become a master at fighting mice, the chance of evasion rises by 40%.

\*The received title gives a bonus increase to all stats by 1.

\*Fame increases by 100.

As a Mouse Master, the skill Spirit of the Cat has increased to Intermediate.

Spirit of the Cat (Intermediate, Active): The cat's roar and flashing eyes have become more bloodthirsty, making mice and other similarly small monsters tremble in terror. Paralysis for 1 minute. Attack, defense, and fighting morale decreases by 20% (All mice, 50% effect applies to smaller monsters)

Mana consumption: 100

It was an additional bonus, awesome enough to make him faint.

Well, to complete the quest with normal methods, the user would have probably had to be at least level 15. Since a level 10 player had finished the quest on his own, he more than deserved the reward. Along with that, it was linked to another quest.

This was the definition of an opportunity.

‘Huhuhu, I may even have to thank Andel and Bulma.’

If he hadn’t been used by Andel and Bulma, Ark wouldn’t have even considered doing three hundred mice-catching quests. Thanks to enduring the lost stat restoration, point by point, an opportunity had opened up for him.

Of course, he didn’t really have any thoughts of thanking them. Earning this opportunity was the result of Ark’s own vicious perseverance. The desire for revenge that he harbored towards those bastards hadn’t softened at all.

“Take this as well.”

“What is that?”

“Granny Johansson, who you often took care of, passed away a few days ago. However, before she died, she did away with the little fortune she had. I was holding onto what she said she wanted to leave to you. It should be about 30 gold.”

Though she was an NPC, hearing that the person he’d personally taken care of had died made his heart heavy. Of course, despite that, Ark was not one to deny the offered money.

It was his duty to fulfill the will she had left.

Anyway, with this, Ark received a bonus of 12 stat points at only level 13. In addition, though he was at a level where he should only be getting copper coins as rewards, he had received a generous sum of money. After Ark pocketed the money, the slate suddenly came to mind and he asked.

“Grandpa, do you happen to know a Viscount named Haverstein?”

“Of course. Sir Viscount Haverstein is none other than the Lord Jackson who governs this district. But why are you asking me this so suddenly?”

“It’s nothing. I’m leaving, then.”

‘It’s simple. I’ve completed gathering information on the next quest.... Now I just have to prepare for my journey.’

With an open smile, Ark found the Smithy. Then, he extended the Demon Mouse leather and requested the manufacture of leather armor. He also left the corroded sword in their care. It was because he had no replacement for the rusty iron sword that broke.

After placing the item in their care, and waiting a day, he went back to reclaim it and the repair on the armor and sword was complete. With an examination of the resulting items, he found the initially disappointing spoils transformed to what he’d originally expected.

The Smithy owner spoke with a boastful expression.

“Since it was your request, I used the best of my skills.”

Of course, they fell a little short from the Smithy’s top leather armor and long sword.

However, those items were nothing more than displays.

If you considered the enormous sum of gold demanded as their prices, no matter how much a user saved money, they’d have to be at least level 20~25 to be able to finally buy those. On the other hand, Ark had been able to acquire enchanted equipment with Options at level 13—he had truly struck it rich.

He also had the inheritance from Granny Johansson and the money he’d earned from brokering the equipment repairs with users. He’d made 60 gold in just 25 days in Harun Village.

Compared to the beginning, he had made great strides.

Ark talked with all the people of Harun Village. He thought there might possibly be another hidden quest. However, there weren't any NPCs who gave him any more quests even when he asked a few times. If that was the case, then there wasn't a need for him to linger in the beginner village any longer.

Ark quickly organized his gear and strode onwards to Jackson Castle in search of Viscount Haverstein.

\* \* \*

“Have all of the applicant reports come in?”

“Yes, we are currently reading them.”

“Are there any guys that caught your interest?”

“Quite a few.”

Kim Gwon Tae sorted through a few pages of the report and handed them to Ha Myung Woo.

The applicants in Global Exos' recruitment exam submitted scheduled reports, which allowed the evaluators to clearly track the applicant's progress.

As he glanced through the report, Ha Myung Woo asked with a surprised expression, “Hoho, it's only been twenty days, but are there 20 users who are already at level 50?”

Compared to other games, it was 3~4 times harder to level up in New World.

In other words, if they had been playing another game, they would have reached level 150~200 in just twenty days. It was an unprecedented speed.

“Naturally, it's a number that's impossible to reach by playing the

game normally. Although they've written in the reports as having done it on their own strength, there seems to be an immense number of people who have supported them. Though it's not the method we wanted, do you think it will be okay?"

"Didn't you predict this much from the beginning?" Ha Myung Woo replied airily, as if it wasn't a big deal.

Since the very beginning of their plan to pick an employee from the game's result, they had predicted the troublesome collaboration to some extent.

It was a test to enter the world-renowned corporation, Global Exos.

There were bound to be people who were pouring an outrageous sum of money into the game, and there would also be people who requested their family, relatives, and even their friends to mobilize and support them. In the end, the applicants who had been watching until now chose to use similar methods. If the applicants were that enthusiastic and absorbed, then it wasn't such a bad thing for Ha Myung Woo.

"Funding and making use of personal connections are also skills. That's why we allowed even the idiots who faked their resumes to participate. If mongrels like them cling more desperately, the exam standards are going to naturally rise. In a situation where we can't directly participate in the system, there's no better method than that."

"Are you considering accepting any of them?"

"As if." Ha Myung Woo laughed as if he was telling him not to joke. "We merely needed users we could control. How are the others?"

"They're approximately level 30~40. It would be less if they used normal methods."

"And what about the ones you pulled out?" Ha Myung Woo gestured at the reports piled up on one side of the table.

“Ah, those are the people who are playing the game with rather unique methods.”

“Unique methods?”

“Yes. Should I say they’re stupid, or should I say they’re brilliant... They’re circulating in the lowest of the levels. In a sense, they have been taking full advantage of the system. Even among them, these fellows have caught my eye. Will you take a look?”

Kim Gwon Tae extended two reports. One of them was on an applicant named ‘Shambala.’ The other was on ‘Ark.’ It was Kim Hyun Woo’s report.

As he scanned through the reports, Ha Myung Woo shook his head and laughed. Both of them were still under level 20.

“What we want isn’t a person who properly enjoys the game. We want a person who can properly utilize and cunningly move forward in the game.”

“Isn’t it true that levels aren’t everything in new world?”

“Of course. But their level can indicate and judge their skill.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“If you want to properly furrow into a game, then you’ve got to be smart. It’s hard to say that a person who couldn’t even get to level 20 in twenty days has a good head. Erase them from the consideration list. And didn’t this one fake his resume?”

“Is he eliminated after all?”

“There’s no way we can read all 2000 reports each time they come in. We’ll need to thin them out in the process. Still, we don’t need to inform them of their disqualification right now. While we’re testing we need to be ‘fair’, after all. It’s bothersome if curs like him get scared and pull out.”

“I understand.”

The reports of Gwak Yong and Kim Hyun Woo were thrown into the shredder. On the applicant list, ‘DISQUALIFIED’ was written in red letters by their names.

\* \* \*

"For the past few days, your cheeks have been sunken in like a person who hasn't slept enough. Did something difficult happen? Well, why wouldn't it be difficult...." His mom, who was looking at him pitifully, heaved a sigh.

When she worried about *him* with her quavering voice, her pale white face, and thin vein, bony arms that were pierced with 3~4 needle drips, Hyun Woo's heart ached.

Truthfully, her concerns weren't unfounded. After Hyun Woo connected to New World, he hadn't been able to sleep properly.

'The game is as important as my real life. I'm behind in comparison to the other applicants, and though I don't have a lot of time to concentrate on the game, I knew it was gonna be tough from the start. That's right. Like Team Leader said, if succeeding or failing the exam isn't simply based on level, even I might have a chance. As long as there's hope, I can't just dejectedly give up.'

Having made his resolution, Hyun Woo had only slept 3 hours a day and devoted himself to the game.

And for the last few days, after he started to fight the Demon Mouse, he'd spent the nights with hardly a wink of sleep. Even this morning, he'd briefly slipped into a nap before his alarm went off and he hastily slapped some clothes on and left.

With his haggard face and grubby clothes, he was definitely in bad shape. However, Hyun Woo answered with a falsely bright face.  
"Nothing difficult happened."

"I'm sorry. I'm called a parent, but I'm just being baggage..."

"I told you it's not like that. It's just that I've been playing around with my friends until late at night these days, so I kinda haven't gotten enough sleep."

"But if I wasn't like this, right now even university...."

"Mother." Hyun Woo abruptly grasped his mother's hand and smiled.  
"I'm really perfectly okay. Honestly, I like working a lot more than

going to university. Work is fun, and my coworkers treat me well too. There are also people who always help me, too. There's no reason for you to worry, Mother. Ah, there is one thing that's difficult."

"What is it?"

"That I can't eat the mixed noodles (bibimgooksul)<sup>1</sup> you make."

"You little... Saying such pointless words...."

"It's the truth. That's the only food I really want to eat. Although I tried to imitate it, the taste wasn't right. So get better quickly and make it for me, please. Okay?"

"Alright. Okay."

Hyun Woo shot a wink at her and chattered, and finally his mother laughed.

Although he had integrity, his personality wasn't charming. In the past, he wouldn't have even been able to imagine saying words like these. But somewhere along the line, in a way that was strange to even him, these kinds of words slowly came out.

This was also one of the effects of playing New World.

'To think that I could use the experience from taking care of Granny Johansson like this.'

When Hyun Woo had taken care of Johansson in Harun Village, there had been things he'd naturally learned.

At first, it had just been a quest that he'd taken while crying to himself to get to the next one. As repeated the quest, he had realized something. The rewards correlated to how well Hyun Woo treated her—the better he did, the more the reward.

The default reward was 1 Silver, but there were cases when he received more than that if he poured all his heart into nursing her. The time it took was the same anyways, so it was much better if he could receive 1 more Silver.

After finding out about that, Hyun Woo was able to dive into the

words and actions Johansson wanted in advance.

What was fun was that his trained senses from the game could transfer to reality too. Although he couldn't use the Nursing skill from the game to increase vigor and courage, just making his mother feel better was not a problem.

It was a small, unnoticeable change, but it made his mother's expression brighten.

'Why wasn't I able to do something this simple for her in the past?' With that alone, Hyun Woo felt that playing New World was worth it.

"Then I'll stop by again the morning after tomorrow. I'll leave the fruit here, so please eat them when you can."

Hyun Woo put down the fruit basket and energetically turned around. After hearing from the doctor that fruits would help with the treatment, Hyun Woo always bought her a fruit basket once a week. Though it was the Hyun Woo who couldn't bear to buy himself one ramen, if it would help his mother recover, he would buy her her not just fruit, but wild ginseng<sup>2</sup>.

Hyun Woo dragged his exhausted, sleep-deprived body to the Mart.

After laboring for 6 hours a day while moving heavy crates here and there and stacking them, the monthly wage he received was 1,500,000 Won (USD\$1,500). In addition, he earned 2,000,000 Won (USD\$2,000) from working 3 part-time jobs, each one 3 hours long.

Global Exos paid their employees 1,500,000 Won (USD\$1,500) a month. The amount Hyun Woo earned by working 15 hours a day was 5,000,000 Won (USD\$5,000) a month.

With his income, he could barely cover his mother's hospital fees and living expenses, the interest on loans, and since he needed to repay the payments for her to be discharged, no matter how much he tightened his belt, he lived a continuously suffocating life. So no matter how difficult it was or how much his body hurt, he could not

stop working.

Hyun Woo shook his head vigorously.

‘Mother is suffering many times more than I am. Yeah, I can’t say weak things and the like.’

After finally finishing a bout of work, Hyun Woo squeezed in between some boxes and briefly closed his eyes.

The reason why he was able to endure with 1 hour of sleep a day was that he slept while riding the subway, or he napped a little in his spare time at work. Of course, those sweet moments of respite were only possible thanks to his co-worker Hye Sun’s help....

“Oppa, oppa!”

At the sound of someone shaking him awake, Hyun Woo sluggishly opened his eyes.

Hye Sun was shaking him with an anxious look on her face.

“Huh? What’s going on? Did the wares come in?”

“A call came in saying they’re coming in a little bit. The owner is gonna come down soon.”

“Alright, I’d better wake up if I don’t want to be nagged at.” Hyun Woo muttered as he thoroughly stretched himself.

Hye Sun asked with a worried look in her eyes. “Oppa, did you take on yet another part-time job?”

“Huh? Nah. On the other hand I’ve dropped a few of ‘em.”

“Then why are you drowsing like this whenever you can these days?”

“Yeah, that’s....” Hyun Woo scratched his head and made a sheepish look. “The truth is, lately I’ve been playing a game at home.”

“Oppa plays games too?”

“What’s this? In the past, there was a time when I played games like crazy. As soon as it was the weekend, if I clicked my mouse the night was spent, and if I drummed away at my keyboard it was already dawn. There are over 3~4 online games where I reached the max levels.”

In those days, he really didn’t know how the days passed and was completely absorbed in the game. His parents were on the lenient side, so he didn’t even have any memories of getting scolded for playing games. But as his life started to turn upside down, everything else had become insignificant.

No matter how hard he tried to concentrate on his game, the burdensome reality got in the way. There hadn’t been a game that engrossed him enough to let him forget reality.

‘I’ll probably never be able to comfortably play games again.’

That’s what he had thought. But lately, those past sensations were reviving in Hyun Woo.

He was so immersed in New World that he was able to forget his goal of playing the game to get employed by Global Exos. That’s why his sleeping time had steadily dropped, and he was so exhausted that he could say his body and mind were ‘running on empty fumes’.

It was to the point that he’d completely blanked out on even the report— he remembered two days before the due date and hurriedly wrote one up and submitted it.

Even so, the time he spent playing the game was truly enjoyable. And he wanted to go into the Global Exos that had created such a game. However, it was highly unlikely. Hyun Woo had learned less and had nothing compared to the other candidates. And he was definitely short on time.

Although the competition ratio was 1 in 200, in reality Hyun Woo was up against 1900 people. He could only conclude that there was a

greater chance of rejection than acceptance. That's why Hyun Woo wanted to enjoy New World as much as he could. He had to return the 10,000,000 Won (USD\$10,000) unit when the test was over.

'If I return the unit, with my income, I probably won't be able to play it again. Even for the sake of playing New World, I want to get accepted. No, I will. I have to believe that I can.'

His apprehension from faking his resume still remained. But seeing as Global Exos hadn't noticed all this time, could he somehow fool them to the very end? He wanted to believe that he could.

As Hye Sun watched Hyun Woo lost in thought, her eyes suddenly widened.

"Then what's the game oppa's been playing lately?"

"Why are you asking that?"

"Well, if it's fun I want to try too."

"You've played a game before?"

"Of course."

"What was it?"

"Mmm, well... what was it... the dancing one..." Hye Sun mumbled with a frown.

"This game is totally different game from those. And even if you know what it is, it's too much for you to play."

"Tch, what exactly is it to make you say that?"

"It's called New World, it came out recently."

"N-New World?" Hye Sun's eyes got round.

"You know it?"

"Of course. That is... you're right. I saw it in a newspaper once. But doesn't it take a huge amount of money to play that game? 'Cause of that unit or whatever."

"Somehow or another, I got to play it for free."

"Somehow or another?"

“I can’t really explain it to you in detail. Ah, I heard there are game rooms where units are installed nowadays. The fees are a little expensive, but if you have the chance, try it once. Just trying it once is going to be better than having me explain it a hundred times.”

Then, a truck topped to the brim with wares entered the warehouse, and Hyun Woo quickly ran towards it with a loading cart.

Hye Sun watched Hyun Woo’s back and nodded her head as if she had made some kind of resolution.

“He said it was New World, huh?”

# Viscount Haverstein's Revenge

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New World, the continent where sunlight-like peace can be obtained through the blessings of God.

However, the trails left behind by history were carved with blood and violence.

There had been a turbulent period in the history of New World, so far past that no one could even recall.

Thousands of races broke off into various factions, creating endless wars. Blood was washed away with more blood, corpses were blanketed with more corpses. What ended this tumultuous era was not a force of righteousness. It was wickedly evil beyond compare.

The devil incarnate did not differentiate between races and attacked everyone. With immense strength, it dyed the continent in black blood.

All the races were like newborn babies before the devil incarnate. They stilled their breaths and trembled at the chaos and horror. It was the start of the so-called Dark Century.

But it is the law of the world that as the darkness deepens, a more brilliant light will arise. So when the devil incarnate's war situation reached its climax, there were those who broke free with light and rose.

The 7 heroes whose names were left in history's path.

3 of them were Human, and the others were Dwarf, Elf, Orc and the Beast hero they called Maban.

At the center of the continent, they formed a strong alliance. Then

the sound of moaning changed to shouts of victory. One by one, as they carved the records of great wars the 7 heroes were finally able to defeat the devil incarnate.

With the disappearance of the devil incarnate, the 7 heroes spoke of what they desired amongst themselves.

“I desire spacious and fertile earth.”

The three Human heroes received three kingdoms on New World.

“I desire a forest overflowing with life.”

“For me a hot fire and rock’s strength!”

“A damp bog and barren wilderness for me.”

The Elf received rights to the forest, the Dwarf the underground, and the Orc the wasteland.

Their eyes looked toward Hero Maban.

Hero Maban spoke with a bitter smile.

“I wish to watch over the blood vow that you made in your hearts.”

“That vow will be kept.”

“Then that is enough.”

Hero Maban spoke those words and disappeared.

The kingdoms the six heroes erected became the present New World. And for over 200 years, New World reached its Golden Age and prospered.

But this time was not only prosperous.

Following the flow of time, the pledge of friendship the six heroes had shared slowly but surely faded away. 200 years was plenty of

time to forget the horror and honors of the past.

The vow splintered. And the crack was largely spreading in a way that anyone could see.

\* \* \*

“Hm, this time should I try putting this one in?”

Ark pushed the herb he'd been holding into the pot.

Then the liquid within the pot turned reddish and shortly firmed up like pudding.

After staring at the pudding with a serious expression, he clenched his eyes shut and spooned in the pudding. The feeling of his weak stomach becoming completely full was accompanied by a surge of energy.

You have created Nutritious Jelly with Survival Cooking. Satiety has been filled to 100% and within 10 seconds 200 health will be restored.

For 10 minutes strength and stamina increase by 2. Wisdom and Intelligence are reduced by 2.

“Nice, it's a success this time.”

Ark blew out a sigh of relief and stored the pudding in his bag.

After his departure from Harun Village, Ark had purposely left the road and diverged into the forest. After actually leaving the village, the users who went to Jackson Castle were mostly at about level 15.

Of course, if you just looked at his stats Ark was also in a state of being over level 10. Still, being at a lower level than others made him feel uneasy.

The level was an absolute number in the game. That his level was

falling meant that he was that much weaker!

That's why he was in the process of completely wiping out any Wild Dogs and Wolves he saw as he cut through the forest. When he killed over two hundred Wild Dogs and Wolves like that, Ark reached level 16. Thanks to that, his sword and armor transformed to a ragged mess, which would crumble if he touched them.

'I should learn the Repair skill when I arrive at Jackson Castle.'

If the precious equipment he struggled to obtain had cracked, he wouldn't even be able to sleep for a few days.

Ark changed his equipment to leather clothing for the time being and concentrated on gathering.

He intended to use this chance to raise his Survival Cooking level as well.

At first he thought about erasing the skill after seeing the creation of a ridiculous food and learning ordinary cooking, but hunting the demon mouse had enlightened him of the usefulness of Survival Cooking.

'I can use it whether it's poison or food.'

But even though he resolved himself and tried to raise it, it wasn't easy.

Survival Cooking was not regular cooking. He couldn't simply mix any ingredients he wanted to create results. When the combination didn't match at all, with an explosion the ingredients would all go to waste.

At last, after over one hundred attempts, Ark had successfully made 15 dishes, including Fragrant Poison Soup. Out of those the only ones worth using were Howling Seasoned Chili, Refreshing Herb Tea, and the recent success Nutritional Jelly.

The Howling Seasoned Chilies was an enormously strong-tasting food that had the effect of temporarily increasing Strength by 10. But after that effect disappeared the user was plunged into a state of Confusion for several minutes, so it was an incomparably dangerous food. After eating this Ark had fought five Wolves and had almost died.

The Refreshing Herb Tea was a tea that restored Mana. It was incredibly delicious, and Ark frequently made and drank it while on his journey.

So as he did the things he'd been unable to do until now because he'd been fighting mice, his skill rose by a lot and he even earned 2 new skills.

Passive SkillSword Mastery (Beginner:26/100) You do not receive weapon penalties even if you use a sword.

Hand-to-hand Combat (Beginner:24/100) Whenever you fight bare-handed, your Attack Power, Accuracy, and Evasion are increased.

Survival Cooking (Beginner:22/100) You can make unidentified dishes with ingredients obtained from nature.

Indomitable Will (Beginner:27/100) When in critical condition, your Attack Power, Critical Hit Chance, and ability to recover are increased.

Foraging (Beginner:29/100) Food ingredients from nature can be gathered.

Active SkillNursing (Beginner:21/100) Gives hope, energy, and courage to patients. Mana consumption 10.

Spirit of the Cat (Intermediate:103/300) Plants horror in mice and small monsters, sealing off their movements; Attack Power, Defense, and morale are sharply decreased. Mana consumption 100.

Ingredient Identification (Beginner, Passive): Can confirm the basic effects of food ingredients that you obtain from the Foraging skill. Because your knowledge in food ingredients has risen, when you

Forage you will no longer sustain damage from ingredients.

Indomitable Body (Beginner, Passive): Even if you confront fairly dangerous situations, you are granted the fortitude to endure them. Your excellent Defense will shine more brightly in difficult situations.

Emergency Defense, Evasion of Fatal Blows increased by 30%. Recovery ability increased by 5%.

The Ingredient Identification seemed to be a skill that added to Survival Cooking. In any case, knowing whether the harvested ingredient was poisonous or not was a good thing. Because then he'd be able to decrease the probability of failure a little.

The truly unexpected skill was Indomitable Body. After squeezing his eyes shut and eating every one hundred plus dish he'd made with Survival Cooking, the Indomitable Body skill had naturally formed. For that kind of a skill to form meant that Survival Cooking was really dangerous.

Ark was satisfied with that much.

“Now that the ingredients are all used up, shall I go?”

Ark shouldered his bag and began to walk again.

Though it was dawn in reality, in New World it was morning.

As he hefted his bag and walked through the forest, a cool wind tickled his face. The smell of grass permeated his nostrils and washed clean his chest.

Though he had thought and marveled about it many times, New World was beyond the classification of a normal game after all. As its name proclaimed, New World was literally a new world.

But what Ark had experienced was still less than 1 out of 100 of New World.

Ark keenly realized this truth after he crossed a hill.

“Oh.....!”

His exclamation naturally burst out.

Endless unfurled plains before a towering citadel city that rose into the sky. The truth that a building made of black stones could be so beautiful was simply shocking. But the Harun Village NPCs had said that Jackson Castle was not such a big city in New World.

‘It’s unbelievable, but that must mean that there are cities that are bigger and more awesome than this.’

After thinking that thought, his heart fluttered like a youth’s.

Anyway, he’d finally parted from the beginner area and had arrived at the real meaning of a city.

When he went into the castle, it wasn’t as beautiful as he’d thought from what he’d seen outside. But the castle was overflowing with vitality.

Now when it came to writing someone off as a beginner from the people there were users at level 50~60, and the streets that couldn’t be compared to the ones in Harun Village were chock full of crowds. The reason was that there were numerous unexplored dungeons left in the area around Jackson Castle.

“For those who’d enjoy warmth and coziness, please come to Hades Guild.”

“If you’re a valiant warrior who wants to experience the battlefield, to Black Axe Guild!”

“The best priced rods, selling at the minimum price! ‘Tis Nook’s Stall.”

“Those who need a mercenary, please contact me.”

He heard shouts from every direction. The bulletin boards laid on every street corner publicized guilds and shops, and the boards were pasted full of flyers for getting parties.

With stalls covered with items strewn about on the ground it wasn't even easy for people to walk. Having spent over twenty days in the carefree and quiet Harun Village, Ark had unintentionally become a hick and could not adapt easily.

Besides the unexplored dungeons, what made Jackson Castle this bustling was that the NPCs related to job changing and the NPCs associated with guilds were all gathered here.

The guilds were an extremely important element in the game.

If many beginners gathered they could even gain more information, and they were very helpful when trying to accomplish difficult requests. That's why every guild representative's eyes were lit up in order to procure even just one more high-level user. But Ark had no thoughts of joining a guild.

The first reason was his deep-rooted mistrust of users. The second was that even if he sometimes forgot, his motivation for playing the game was different from other users. To Ark, New World wasn't simply a game, but an employment exam. It'd be tough to needlessly join a guild and waste time doing useless things.

What Ark was interested in was the job change possible from level 15.

It was the biggest reason why users flocked to Jackson Castle after reaching level 15.

In New World, there were twelve broad classes of jobs.

Warrior, Archer, Magician, Thief, Priest and so on... and if you went into details there were several branches included in each class of job. So one would do up to 2 or 3 job changes.

“Stat.”

~~Character Name~~

~~Alignment~~

~~Level~~

~~Profession~~

~~Molese Hunter~~

~~Meleah~~

~~Barding~~

~~Stamina~~

~~Intelligence~~

Equipment Effects

Sharply Shining

Sword: Attack

speed +5

Black Bear

Mouse Leather

Armor: Agility

+2, Cold

Resistance +20

Though they were meager stats, if meager at all, but considering that he was level 16, they were at a decent level.

If you just looked at his stats, his wisdom and intelligence were too low for him to choose a profession in the magic division. The jobs that matched him were combat-related; up until now Ark had mostly done combat, so he'd unconsciously poured all his stats in Strength, Agility, and Stamina.

‘Should I just use this chance to job change to a Warrior?’

Even if they were the same level 15, the difference between a character that had job changed and one that hadn't was enormous.

If he changes profession, he would learn new skills that were particular to the job, and a lot of bonus stats would be added. In addition, if he did the job change quest, he would acquire the matching branch of that Profession.

It was truly like turning over a new leaf!

But Ark shook his head.

‘I don’t even know the job characteristics properly yet...’

Ark hadn’t seen any scenes of job-changed users fighting yet.

Although he could basically see the characteristics of the classified jobs just by looking at their names, there were slight differences between each game.

What skills would form, what skills he couldn’t learn if he job changed, he had to meticulously consider them and make a decision. It wasn’t a matter he could just choose based on his mood without personally experiencing them.

‘In New World, Ark is my one and only alter ego. I’ve gotta choose carefully.’

If it was another game he could job change and if he didn’t like it he could just raise a new one. But there was only one chance to choose in New World. There could be no limit to his cautiousness.

‘Okay, for now I’ll hunt with Jackson Castle as my base and watch job-changed users. ‘Cause right now I’ve got other things to do too.’

Ark opened his bag and looked over the slate with an affectionate glance.

It was the Mysterious Slate that the demon mouse had watched over. When Ark looked at the slate, he sank into a feeling of delight. Ark had earned many benefits simply from the journey to find this slate.

He’d earned 12 bonus stats, and he’d learned Survival Cooking for free. On top of that, he’d earned 2 of the enchanted equips that were difficult to see at his level. It was enjoyable to simply entertain the thoughts of what other benefits this linked quest might bring him.

‘For that I’ll have to meet Viscount Haverstein first.’

Ark went and found the Lord’s castle with hurried steps.

“What do you need?”

As he’d been wandering about as a hillbilly wrapped in some kind of animal leather, the guard glared at him.

Well, it was a virtual reality game, so he’d expected that response.

“I have come to meet Viscount Haverstein-nim.”

“What? You mean the Lord?”

“Yes, if you show him this he will probably meet with me.”

Ark pulled out the parchment he’d discovered in the cave.

The guard shot him a doubtful glance and went into the castle. After about 10 minutes had passed, he ran back outside along with a man. He was a middle-aged knight with a bushy bearded face. Seeing as he was wearing modest chain mail, it looked like he wasn’t Viscount Haverstein.

The middle-aged knight introduced himself as Cross, the General of Defense in charge of the castle’s guards. Once Ark also introduced himself simply, Cross asked with an urgent voice.

“Alright, Ark. Were you the one who discovered this parchment?”

“Yes.”

“Did you by any chance discover some strange item near the place where the parchment was?”

“I discovered it.”

Ark quickly took out the slate from his bag and showed it to Cross.

Cross blew out the breath he’d been holding.

“I don’t know whether I should call this the guidance of God, or the devil’s prank.”

“What do you mean?”

“That slate is an item Viscount Haverstein-nim has been searching for a long time. However, none of the people he sent to find the slate have returned.”

“What is this slate for?”

“I don’t know the details either. I only know that it’s connected to the ruins that were discovered near this territory. As the years passed and its whereabouts couldn’t be found, Viscount Haverstein gave up on the slate in the end. And then he struck off for the ruins while leading the Slyphid Knights. But for the slate to appear after the Viscount left...”

Cross clasped Ark’s hand tightly and requested.

“If it’s okay, can’t you personally deliver the slate to the Viscount? If you hurry and follow him now, you might be able to catch the Viscount before he arrives at the ruins.”

At the same time, the quest name was updated to ‘Secret of the Slate = Secret of the Slate II’. The content was about meeting Haverstein, who had left for the ruins that held a connection to the slate.

‘Wahahaha, this is it. I’ve been waiting for something like this.’

As a spark fizzed into Ark’s mind, the formula of ‘quest + dungeon = huge treasure’ arose.

There was no reason to hesitate. Ark quickly nodded. Cross gave him a horse and 2 soldiers.

No matter how busy he was, he had to take care of some business before he left. Ark found the blacksmith, had all his equipment

repaired, and mounted the horse. But it was impossible for Ark, who organized a mart warehouse in reality, to have ever ridden a horse.

“Eehuk, eeeeeuhhh!”

Thinking *since it's a game, it should work out somehow*, was a mistake.

Before he was able to go a few kilometers he rolled and fell off the horse five times. He paled beside the soldiers, who held the reins of Ark's horse for him.

“Put your strength in your thighs and lay flat on the back of your horse. We shall guide the horse.”

\* \* \*

“Can't, can't we rest a little before we go?”

“If we were to follow and catch the Viscount before he arrives at the ruins, there is not a moment to be lost. Giddy up!”

‘Damn it, I'm sayin' I'll DIE before we arrive!’

Though his stomach churned, there was nothing good about (antagonizing) the NPCs who were affiliated with the lord's castle.

Despite that, for the sake of the new skill he had learned, he had to endure.

Riding skill has risen by 3. Horse riding is a little bit easier.

The Riding skill that formed when he was about to hurl (went up by 3 when the urge to spring away penetrated his lower back and he desperately restrained himself.) After that Ark was able to straighten his back and hold the reins himself. And so after a day and a night of spurring the horses on like crazy, the hazy shape of the ruins appeared.

Thankfully it seemed like they weren't late, as the sight of the Slyphid Knights gathered at the ruin entrance came into view.

Ark and the soldiers he'd come together with got off their horses and ran over.

"My Lord, we found the slate!"

"What?"

The person who turned his head was a noble of approximately sixty years of age.

His coarse, white hair fell to his shoulders, and his face looked blue from lack of oxygenation. But his eyes shined with a penetrating light. This was precisely Viscount Haverstein.

With a dignified gait, he approached Ark.

"Are you the traveler who brought the slate? Can you show me?"

"Yes."

"There is no doubt. This is exactly the slate I was looking for."

After Ark pulled out the slate for him, Haverstein looked over it with squinted, trembling eyes for a long while. He needed a very long time before he was able to turn his eyes on Ark again.

"You probably cannot even imagine what a huge help your good deed has become for me. The rule is that good deeds have a price. Therefore, I, Haverstein, have a responsibility to reward your pains. Say what you desire. If it is the request of a man of your merit, I will listen to anything."

Starlight rustled and fell from Ark's pupils.

He could finally receive the reward he'd waited and waited for.

And that he would listen to anything!

‘Should I ask for a magic item? Or should I ask for money?’

As Ark agonized over this and that, he belatedly discovered something strange. Then he noticed the cleverly hidden trap in the words of Haverstein’s quest.

“It’s a request appropriate of my merit?”

Thinking carefully about it, it was a peerlessly ambiguous statement.

Though Haverstein had said ‘anything’, the condition ‘appropriate of merit’ was attached. In the end that meant there was an upper limit. But since the merit wasn’t simply put out in numbers, he couldn’t know what the limit was. Then what method could he use to guess the upper limit?

‘It’s the difficulty!’

Ark opened the quest window and checked it. The difficulty was G. From what he’d experience so far, this kind of difficulty would only earn him a reward of 1 gold at most, or a follow-up item.

‘Is that all I can earn with this quest?’

His feeling of excitement disappeared and was replaced by dismay.

To obtain the slate, he’d had to kill hundreds of mice and defeat the demon mouse. He’d raced the horse to meet Haverstein to the point where his back had almost broken. But the reward was just 1 gold?

Then yet another question rose in Ark’s mind.

‘Is pulling out this slate truly the end? But then why did the General of Defense send me all the way here? He could have just used the soldiers. And the quest says to meet Haverstein, but there’s nothing written about giving him the slate. That’s right, this is a branched quest!’

A branched quest was one that changed based on the user's choice.

At the end of many inferences, Ark was sure that this was a branched quest. A different quest related to the slate. In other words, the way to obtain the real reward that Ark wanted was different.

Ark suddenly raised his head and replied.

“What I desire is to go into the ruins with the Viscount.”

“What? You can't do that!”

“Why do you say that? Since I brought the slate that's related to the ruins, I think I'm qualified enough. Did the Viscount not promise a reward appropriate for my merits after all?”

“Do you not know? I'm saying this for your own good. That ruin is not just a commonplace dungeon. This is the lair where the devil incarnate is holed up in. I can't drag in a civilian like you inside that place!”

“Are you breaking the promise that you yourself made?”

Ark pressed Haverstein with a sharp voice.

One should always maintain a good relationship with the NPCs. That was Ark's ironbound principle. But it was a different matter if there was an even greater profit on the line.

There were many ways to re-raise intimacy that had fallen, but there were no ways to get back a quest item that he'd failed to hold onto. Whether the NPC was a Lord or a Viscount, if it was necessary he would even go into a head-on clash to obtain the profit.

“You're really... guk, cough, cough!”

Haverstein, who had been glaring at Ark, suddenly fell to one knee as he vomited blood.

“My Lord!”

The soldiers who'd been in the area urgently rushed over. But there was a person who rushed and helped Haverstein quicker than they. It was Ark.

“Please leave him to me. I have a lot of experience in taking care of patients.”

As he quickly used the Nursing skill, the color returned to Haverstein's face.

Ark spoke as he furtively smiled.

“You seem deeply ill. To explore the ruins with a body like this... and isn't it true that there aren't any people here who know how to take care of a patient?”

“I don't need a caretaker or whatever. Cough, cough!”

“No, I can see the state of a patient. You will not be able to walk, let alone swing a sword, like this. Surely you do not wish to become baggage to your subordinates by flaunting your pride?”

“How-however....”

“Please give me permission to nurse you, my Lord. No, you must do so. I too am merely a caretaker. I cannot just leave a patient and walk away.”

Ark spoke with a resolute expression.

Haverstein heaved a sigh.

It was a sigh acknowledging his defeat.

When the ringing sound of drumbeats followed, Ark was sure that his choice had been the right one.

Quest has been updated. Secret of the Slate II = Secret of the Slate III  
You must explore the ruin with Viscount Haverstein to uncover the secret of the slate.

Term for quest failure: If Viscount Haverstein dies, you will automatically lose the quest.

Difficulty: + E

\* \* \*

“Attack, sweep away the accursed monsters!”

“Ooohhaaaahhh!”

Over 50 Sylphid Knights stampeded and bravely swung swords and maces.

The Gargoyles and Goblins obstructing their way jumped out, explosively. Then, in the hands of the Magicians, flames burst out and turned the passageway into an inferno. The Goblins swallowed in the path of fire let out horrible shrieks and crawled out, but what was waiting for them was a baptism of swords and maces.

Clearing scores of monsters didn't even take 10 minutes.

Ark was watching the battle with surprised eyes.

‘Strong.’

Two days had passed since they had entered the ruin.

The insides of the ruin was tangled with complicated, maze-like paths, so it was impossible to distinguish the path, or be aware of the direction. And every time they went around a corner, an incredible number of monsters charged at them. However, they were no match for the Sylphid Knights.

They were knights that the lord had personally led here. Even their equipment was on a different level from ordinary soldiers. They were

Knights armed with shining armor and weapons. And their related skills must be at an extremely high level, because they were able to defend every attack with their shields, and whenever they swung their swords, fatal blows were dealt.

It was the first time he'd seen an NPC's battle — the high level was to the point where he went and lost his confidence.

After finishing a bout of fighting, a cross mark appeared above the heads of the Knights. It was a sign that indicated their level up.

'Just how much of a level do those guys have?'

Levels existed for NPCs, too. Of course, if they won many fights, their level would go up. However, the NPCs themselves didn't know about the concept of levels. If you asked them what their level was, they would return the question, asking what that was. And if you tried to explain it in detail, they would suddenly get mad.

In New World, the vocabulary level, skill, and stats were foreign to them; in other words, those were just users' terms.

Even magic or skills that let them peek at someone's information window didn't get through to the NPCs. Therefore, there was no way to confirm it, but it was definite that they were at a much higher level than Ark.

'Anyways, if I stay with them there should be no risk of death.'

The updated Secret of the Slate quest's difficulty was a staggering +E.

It was a quest at a level where it'd be impossible to solve it by himself, no matter what he did. But if he did it with the Sylphid Knights, it didn't even look like it'd be that difficult.

The problem was the condition of Haverstein's survival.

After they entered the ruin, Haverstein's health became increasingly weak. Ark, who had learned the Nursing skill, could tell that he didn't have much life left. If, by any chance, Haverstein died before the completion of the quest, the quest would end in a failure and the Sylphid Knights would return to Jackson Castle.

That was the reason why a quest where he didn't even need to personally fight had a difficulty of +E.

'No matter what happens, I have to save him until the quest is resolved. Tch, what a pain.'

The sight of Haverstein coughing beside him filled him with annoyance.

If the quest didn't have such a condition, he wouldn't give a damn if Haverstein died or not. More importantly, he had to participate in the fight and hit the monsters that looked like crammed up wads of experience at least once.

Even those strong Knights were leveling up without rest. At his level, if he was fortunate enough to defeat one or two of the monsters, he'd probably be able to garner quite a lot of experience. However, he couldn't afford to do that. If he didn't stand by and watch over Haverstein, who was deteriorating by the minute, there was no knowing what sudden result might occur.

"Cough, cough!"

"You are okay. Illness comes first from the mind. If you firmly steel your heart, you can overcome any disease. Have courage. You can't lose hope."

As he prattled on about things he didn't even believe in, he spewed the Nursing skill and Haverstein's face became a little brighter.

"You have my thanks. If I listen to your words, my strength rises as if it's really easing the disease. However, I am aware. That no matter how much I steel my mind, there's no hope for my life."

“What are you saying.....”

“No, it’s the truth. Because my disease did not come first from the mind.”

“Are you saying that you know about the disease?”

“Do you know why I’ve come here leading the Knights with a body like this?”

Haverstein’s clouded gaze swept across the dreary ruin.

“Because it’s here, the cursed devil killed my father and planted the disease in me.”

“Devil? Can you please tell me in more detail?”

“I may as well. Since you’ve already stepped foot in this place, knowing this won’t be bad. Truthfully, a long time ago there was a terrible calamity that befell Jackson Castle. It buried the land in disease and famine.”

“Are you saying that was the devil’s doing?”

“Yes. It was the doing of this malicious devil that came from a faraway continent. My ancestors of the Jackson family, which came to know of this truth, naturally rallied soldiers and fought with the devil. But with only the final blow remaining, the devil escaped, and since then the Jackson family has suffered from the devil’s curse. All the descendants of the Jackson family eventually die of a curse that brought about a terminal illnesses once they turn twenty.”

“What? But the Viscount is...”

“That my life is still bound to me is thanks to Father.”

Haverstein tightly clutched the silver necklace that fell to his chest.

"As the other ancestors did, Father also strove to release the family's curse. And then in the same year when I was born, he finally found out. That the devil that had fled that time was hiding in this ruin. If that devil is killed, then the curse will end. But the place where that devil was hiding was firmly locked by an ancient force. The slate that you brought is precisely the key to opening that room."

At the end of a long effort, his father had finally laid hands on the slate. Then, as Haverstein was doing now, he had led soldiers and searched for the devil.

Haverstein stared blankly at the Sylphid Knights as if meaning to see his father's appearance from that time among them.

"First, I listened to the soldiers who were in the verge of death. They said a long and lengthy fight had occurred. In the end, it resulted in Father's defeat. But Father, using the last of his strength, gave the devil a large wound. Thanks to that the curse has weakened, and I was able to live to this age."

"So that means that the Viscount is suffering from the disease because that malicious devil has regained its strength."

"You're right. And since a few years ago, traces of the curse have even appeared on my now fifteen-year old son. The devil's strength has become stronger. But the slate had already disappeared with my father's death. For the last 3 years I tried to find the slate, but to no avail. In that time my body has become exhausted and thin, like this. Having lost the time to wait any longer, I went to battle to destroy the door with sheer force and punish the devil."

"If the devil is killed, will the Viscount's disease also be cured?"

Haverstein shook his head.

"No, it's already too late for me. Now, even if I killed the devil I cannot live on. However, I cannot allow my son to meet the same fate as I. After all my father was also in the same situation as I, and fought the devil for my sake. This time, it is my turn to do for my

son, as my Father has done for me. And I believe that I can succeed. That you brought the slate here, is without a doubt, a revelation from God.”

Ark was moved to tears.

A father for the sake of his son, and the son for the sake of *his son*, was burning away the last of his life.

Of course, they were NPCs. Though they looked like people, they weren’t.

Within that too-realistic face there was electricity that flowed along electric wires.

Despite that, the light with which Haverstein looked at Ark was sincere. That he himself was dying, and for his son he would throw away his life — he truly thought that way.

Most NPCs are similar in that sense. Although there were bad people and good people here in this world as there are in the real world, at the very least, people here don’t play with others’ sincere feelings through cunning lies.

That was the difference between an NPC and a user.

“The Viscount’s wish will definitely come true.”

“Thank you.”

Haverstein fell asleep with a more comforted face.

After that Ark took care of Haverstein with all his sincerity.

A father who would throw down everything for the sake of his son.

Though it was incredibly embarrassing, Ark could feel the presence of his own father in Haverstein.

Meanwhile, heartfelt sympathy formed towards Haverstein. He had to help Haverstein for the quest anyways. If it was a done deal, wouldn't it be better to do it sincerely?

When a day had passed like that, Ark received a message he hadn't even imagined.

Of the skills Ark had learned, Nursing had the slowest growth. Although he'd nursed Johansson about ten times, the skill points had been at a mere 20. Even after the nursing he'd done for Haverstein up until now, it was at 30.

But then it suddenly started swiftly going up, and in a moment it had reached Intermediate level.

Through care imbued with sincerity, the Nursing skill level has gone up.Nursing(Intermediate, Active): Can instill life by making the patient's body and soul more comfortable with Increasingly proficient skillfulness.

Used on a patient, vigor and courage are increased by 40%. Mana consumption: 10

\* Intermediate Nursing bonus effect(Nurse's Soul): Can sincerely pray for the patient and grant the effect of a minor blessing. All stats are slightly increased, and through devout piety, resistance to curses related to the mind will form.

Ark's mouth fell open.

It wasn't because the skill went up, but because of the reason.

'Does that mean it knows that I treated Viscount Haverstein with sincerity?'

The sudden, rapid growth of the skill had happened, since Ark had started to sincerely worry about Haverstein. Then didn't that mean that Ark's change in attitude influenced the growth of the skill?

Of course, it wasn't something that was physically impossible.

New World was a system that scanned the brain and controlled the character with the user's brainwaves. Emotion was, in the end, a brain wave. It was possible for the system to understand changes in emotion. But for even that part to influence the growth of skill...

Stating that was simple.

'Whether it's interaction with an NPC or learning a skill, the effect is maximized if you pour your sincerity.'

It was a principle that was so natural in reality. But who would have thought to apply such a principle even in a game?

It was shocking technological prowess, and a shocking discovery.

By the mistake in Harun Village, Ark was still in a state that fell far short of the other applicants. Even though he'd received a bonus of 12 points thanks to his special title, making up for half a month of difference in progress was difficult.

Though it'd be nice if they would take a nap like the story of the rabbit and turtle, it was best not to expect that. But now it seemed like he could find the way to narrow that difference.

'There are still many unidentified systems in New World. If I find out about all of them, catching up to them isn't just a long-shot dream! That's right, the answer was right in front of me all along! Anyways the difference from users that started at the same time is that and only that. If I'm to get ahead of the others, then I can't just follow what the others are doing.'

He saw a found new hope.

Afterward, Haverstein vomited blood more frequently.

As his spark of life continued to flicker out, his health deteriorated to the point where he could not recognize anyone. Every time that happened Ark used his Intermediate Nursing skill and forcefully held his life in place.

For the completion of the quest, for the growth of the skill, and for this unfortunate NPC's small wish...

\* \* \*

“We have finally arrived!”

A light of emotion rose on Haverstein's ashen face.

It had been five days since they had entered the ruins. The group had finally arrived at the destination. A massive stone door engraved with complicated patterns!

The devil they were searching for was hiding behind this door.

The stone door that steamingly emitted a dismal aura, had a space on one side that was big enough to fit the slate.

Haverstein looked toward Ark and nodded his head. With a strained expression, Ark walked up to the stone door and pressed the slate in. Then the ruins rumbled as the stone gate slowly parted.

“Everyone prepare for battle, we will enter as we protect the Viscount!”

“Yes!”

A space that was entirely different from the interior of the ruin appeared. Uneven stone walls, and the ceiling was studded with stalactites like a demon's fangs. It was a colossal hall made by the strength of Mother Nature.

It happened when Knights stayed vigilant on all sides and arrived at the center of the hall.

Boss Monster Twisted Dream Weaver Debra has appeared.

“The devil has appeared!”

Ark shouted in surprise. At the same time, from the opposite entrance a black aura spewed out. Having received Ark's warning, the Knights hastily fumbled to raise their shields, but the enormous shock blew away 3~4 people.

"Kekekeke, mayflies without fearful heads have crawled in to die!"

Within the dark, the sight of a huge being that looked to be a good 10 meters came into view. With armor of darkness and an enormous sword, the blood-red cape on its back fluttered as it emitted a dismal aura.

Debra's body twisted like a whirlwind, and upon coming in contact with the black aura, the brave Knights fell into panic.

"I-it's Debra!"

"Twisted Dream Weaver Debra of horror!"

"Do not be afraid, this bastard is just the cowardly monster that was coiled up and hiding within the stone door!"

Haverstein squeezed out his vigor and shouted. Only then did the Knights snap back to attention and rush toward Debra.

"Kekekee, foolish newborn pups!"

Deep blue sparks flew out every time Debra opened its mouth.

It swung the length of the enormously large sword. With one blow, 3~4 soldiers were shattered as they were blown away. The Sylphid Knights that had shown their unbeatable strength as they had crossed through the ruin were no match for Debra.

The deep blue sparks that spewed from its mouth melted their armor, and as the sword flew down in succession, the Knights collapsed with one, two wounds. But the Sylphid Knights didn't yield and endlessly besieged Debra with a barrage of swords. The surrounding Magicians

on the outskirts also threw lightning and flames.

At the consecutive, bursting flashes, Debra must have taken a blow, because it staggered.

“Today is the end of you!”

One of the Magicians hollered as he tore in with a skill combo of? Penetrate?.

Then, a red light enveloped Debra and a Health number cut in, about about half appeared above its head.

The Knights' moral suddenly rose.

“The bastard doesn't even have half its health left!”

“The time is now, finish it off!”

“Keuk, you bastards...”

Debra's eyes flashed and a black aura surged out.

Wrapped in the aura, the Knights put on vacant expressions like they were somehow bewitched people, and then suddenly began to brawl amongst themselves.

“It's Bewitching magic! Magicians!”

“Yes!”

The Magicians, who were outside the range of the aura, quickly uttered an incantation.

Resistance Spell, Cleanse Spell, Strengthening Willpower and other spells unfurled in the area. In spite of that, the Knights were unable to shake off the Bewitchment and floundered. Rather, the situation became more serious and 3~4 of them were felled by the swords of their friends.

Embarrassment spread over the Magicians' faces.

"The spells aren't dispelling it!"

"Everyone please calm down, no matter who our opponent is, we will surely be victorious."

In the moment of the desperate situation, Ark's voice cried out into the hall.

The pupils of the Bewitched Knights gradually focused and they suddenly came to.

It was the power of the Nursing skill. Even when the fight first started, there had been nothing Ark could do.

It was Debra's attack, which could take out a two or three Knights, and got it out of critical condition. If the level 16 Ark was to get grazed it, he would definitely fall into critical condition. All he could do was to nurse Haverstein from the back.

But the situation changed as the Bewitched Knights brawled amongst themselves and suffered wounds. Because they weren't simple Knights and were able to do a lot of damage to each other, they had become Ark's patients.

When he used the Nursing skill on a patient, the Intermediate's special effect, minor blessing, was granted. Thanks to that, they were able to resist the Bewitchment, which was a curse of the mind, and shake it off.

Not just that, but a bonus of vigor and courage 40%, and +3 to all stats. Of course, the Knight's attack and defense power increased, and the Magician's casting speed became faster.

"Oooohhhhhh, my strength is surging!"

"We can win! Down with Debra!"

The Knights cheered and with a rush they swarmed and swung their swords. Debra erupted with a howl of fury but there was nothing it could do.

That was because Ark was not letting the soldiers rest.

“Please hurry and stand. Victory is right in front of you. Even though it’s the devil, everyone’s fighting spirit must not topple. Through unbreakable fighting spirit and unyielding courage you will undoubtedly become heroes written in history!”

“Haa haa, my stamina has hit the bottom. Let me rest a little...”

“Get out there and fight! Your bravery will carry us to victory!”

“Oooohhhh! En, energy is surging! Come at me, devil!”

As Ark’s voice rang out, the Knights that had fallen over one after another sprang to their feet and swung their swords.

Abruptly, as the zombie-like Knights returned to the fight, Debra’s life quickly dropped. When it plummeted to 1 out of 10, it fell to one knee. Then Haverstein, who had been directing the Knights, climbed atop Debra’s body and thrusted his sword toward its throat.

“Die, devil.... kaa!”

Suddenly Debra stretched its arm and seized Haverstein’s throat.

“Kekekekeeuuk, was the suffering good?”

Debra slowly raised its body. Screams of disbelief burst out from the surrounding Knights.

“Life, its life....!”

“Oh my god, does that mean this bastard is immortal?”

Debra's cape fluttered as it twirled its body and its life was restored to 100 percent.

Ark flung himself through the disconcerted Knights.

“VISCOUNT!”

Dying was no longer the problem.

If Haverstein died, the quest was a failure.

‘To come all the way here and the quest is a failure? No way!’

As Ark ran in Debra swung its sword. It was an attack Ark had predicted. Ark quickly unleashed Hand-to-Hand Combat, and evaded. Then he pulled the sword aside and struck the bastard’s hand with all his might.

A fatal blow exploded and Debra lost hold of Haverstein.

Ark caught him and urgently moved back.

“YOU! YOU DARE!”

With a furious shout, Debra ran at him.

“Look at that! That stranger is fighting for the Viscount with his life on the line!”

“Everyone protect the stranger!”

The Knights, motivated by Ark’s action, stamped forward. But now, no matter how much they struck out with their swords, Debra’s life did not decrease. In other words, it was immortal!

Debra didn’t even concern itself with their attacks and strode forth, swinging its sword like lightning.

Ark hastily stood in front of Haverstein and raised his sword.

BAM, with a heavy shock his life was cut to at least half.

‘HOLY SHIT, IF I GET HIT ONE MORE TIME IT’S OVER!’

His eyesight blurred. In that moment the sword went up again and fell with a force that split the air.

“No! Everyone concentrate their magic power! Warp!”

The Magicians concentrated their magic power on Ark and Haverstein.

The magic to warp another person was an Advanced 7 Circle spell.

It wasn’t a spell that these 4~5 Circle Magicians could produce.

But as 5 Magicians integrated their magic power with ‘Willpower Exchange,’ the 7 Circle spell was completed.

With a flash, Ark and Haverstein were transported somewhere.

Debra’s sword struck the floor right after that.

# Cat Knight

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“What is this place?”

Ark took a look at his surroundings.

Darkness so thick, couldn’t see an inch of the area surround him.

“If it was a Warp, it shouldn’t be that far away...”

The distance you could move with a Warp was just 200 meters. Furthermore, it was a spell that couldn’t designate a coordinate. It just randomly moved you anywhere in the vicinity. Nevertheless, the reason why it belonged under the category of Advanced Spells was because if a Magician used Warp, they demonstrated enormous power.

There were many cases where a Magician with weak defense was attacked by an approaching fighter before he could utter a spell. He would then use Warp, which had a short cast time. The distance wasn’t much, and the coordinates couldn’t be designated either, but it was the most useful spell for getting behind a disconcerted fighter.

There was an immense difference in the survival rates of Magicians who didn’t learn Warp and Magicians who did.

‘Anyway, seems like I’ve survived thanks to it.’

As Ark wandered around, he soon discovered Haverstein, who had collapsed in the area.

“Viscount, please come to your senses!”

The weakly trembling Haverstein opened his eyes.

“It’s Ark... You survived. What a relief.”

Haverstein mumbled with a dull voice.

“Please come to your senses. You can’t become weak. Don’t you have to carry out your father’s revenge?”

“You’re wrong. Even if I listen to your words... strength... doesn’t come out... The soldiers have suffered too... Even my father’s revenge... I couldn’t even protect my son... Pathetic... Cough!”

Haverstein jerkily vomited blood. Soon afterward, he grabbed his silver necklace, ripped it away, and pulled it out for Ark.

“Ark, my son is strong... Without a doubt, he will grow up strong... Tell this to that child... ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you... And be sure to protect your son...’ Tell him... Can you promise me... that you will live and tell him...?”

“I understand.”

You have acquired Viscount Haverstein’s Blood-stained Silver Necklace.

“Thank you...”

The weakly trembling Haverstein’s arm fell limply. Then his body slowly became transparent.

Ark softly clenched his teeth. The body was disappearing. Though it was nothing new, with this scene, he was once again reminded of the fact that NPCs are not human. Nevertheless, his heart was sorrowful.

Although he was an NPC, he was someone Ark had cared for in his own way. Ark had sincerely nursed him. Seeing someone like that disappear before his eyes flooded him with an indescribable mixture of emotions.

Then the sound of rolling drums rang in his ear.

'Ah, that's right. Damn, if Haverstein dies then the quest is a failure, right?'

For it to end in failure after suffering so much... But exploding in anger would be futile.

A dead person doesn't disappear. The NPCs were also the same. The one and only point that differed from reality, was that when NPCs died a person who could perform their role in their place would soon appear. No, was reality like that too?

While Ark was having those thoughts, the quest window opened.

Ark's eyes widened.

"Oh? What?"

The quest has been updated.

Secret of the Slate III -> Deliver the Keepsake to Viscount Haverstein's Son

Viscount Haverstein's death was predetermined; though it's regrettable, you can only accept it. However, he has left his will that you, who he trusted, deliver the keepsake to his son. As his will prescribed, you must escape the ruin and deliver it to his son in the castle.

Note, if you die starting from the time you receive this quest, the keepsake will disappear and you will automatically fail the quest as well. In the case of failure, you can suffer penalties from the item related to this quest, so be careful.

Difficulty: +E

Surprisingly, the quest was still not over.

'Wait, after all the quest didn't say that I absolutely had to kill Debra.'

New World was a game with a high level of freedom.

The quest was the same as well.

It was the same as going into the ruin by badgering Haverstein. The objective of the quest could fluidly change following the user's choice. If Debra had been defeated, then Ark would've received a reward and it would end like that. Even in the case that it couldn't be defeated, there was room left for another choice.

"That's right. Since the goal was to find the secret of the ruin, rooting through the entire ruin and meeting Debra was already enough to complete this quest. Then this quest is yet another branch.'

Because this was a quest that could only be received with a certain amount of accumulated intimacy with Haverstein.

"Anyway, it's a relief, but what do I do 'bout this? Since they've hammered the nail on not letting me use tricks..."

Ark muttered with an annoyed voice.

In any case, it was difficult to leave the ruin again by himself. So as Ark read the explanation, he had considered whether he should kill himself.

When a user dies, he would awaken at the registered supply base.

The last place he had registered was Jackson Castle. Although his stats would be cut, he was now used to restoring stats.

If all he had to do was restore the stats and turn in the quest, he'd be able to complete in a +E rank quest.

Now he thought about just giving up on the quest. However, he shook his head.

It was a quest that had come linked several times. Who knew how large the reward would be? Also, his feelings weighed into his decision.

If possible, he wanted to fulfill Haverstein's last request.

'He was an NPC who wasn't fond of many people anyways, so I should try to do as much as possible. Getting the item penalties worries me too...'

Because he hadn't properly understood one simple message in Harun Village, there had been a time when he had suffered horribly.

If something seemed suspicious, it was good to be on the cautious side.

'Then, where do I have to go now anyways? Seeing as he gave me the quest, there seems to be a way out... well, there's nothin' I can do but try moving for now.'

Ark pressed his hand to the wall with one hand and walked in the dark.

It was the simplest way to escape from the labyrinth.

There was a small passage on one side of a round, circular space. When he followed that passage to the end, a wide space appeared yet again.

It was when he had encountered that kind of space three times. He suddenly heard the sound of something moving quickly in the dark. As Ark stopped walking, a red light abruptly flashed in front of his eyes.

You have been attacked. -5 Health.

'It's an enemy!'

Ark rapidly drew his sword. Simultaneously, he heard a slithering sound in the entire cave. It was not the sound of one or two people. In the next few moments, was suddenly pounced at. Although he didn't take any heavy damage, he his Health was being steadily

sucked.

If this enemy could cut his Health that fast with 5 damage, then there were probably about a hundred of them at the very least. With that many piled up, even if his opponents were Mice, it was a dangerous situation. When his Health was about a half, Ark jerked his head up.

“Spirit of the Cat!”

Nyaaaa~!

The sharp cry swept through the cave. In that moment, the stream of mindless attacks just ended.

‘Are they caught in paralysis?’

Ark quickly raised his sword to finish them. Unexpectedly, hundreds of pairs of yellow eyes bobbed up in front of him. They were eyes glinting with bloodthirst. The cave became chilly.

‘Damn, they weren’t paralyzed. Did it fail?’

The Intermediate Spirit of the Cat paralyzed mice with a 100 percent chance. But when used against small monsters, there was a 50 percent chance of failure. In the end, that meant it was 50/50 chance, but it had unfortunately gone and tripped on that chance.

On top of that, the mana consumption of the Intermediate Spirit of the Cat was 100. If he used it once, he couldn’t use it for 10 minutes until his mana was completely restored.

While Ark was writhing in distress, the eyes slowly came closer.

All of sudden, he heard a sharp voice.

“Stop. He’s not an enemy.”

At the same time, the danger disappeared as if he were dreaming.

Even until then, he had only seen the yellow eyes of his opponents. Ark had thought that was because of the dark. But the area where the eyes were became hazy, and a form he could distinguish, even in the dark appeared.

“Ca-cat?”

What was surrounding Ark was a swarm of about a hundred cats. Cats of every variety that could be found in the encyclopedia of life, even cats he'd never heard of were mixed in.

“Hm, how is it that you used a skill of the Meow?”

Then he suddenly heard a voice right in front of his nose. When he turned his head, a girl was ramming her nose into Ark and sniffing. Ark stumbled back in astonishment.

‘A girl? But what’s with those ears and tail?’

As Ark examined the target, his eyes widened.

The appearance of the person who was prodding him with her nose was undoubtedly a girl. Her face was pretty and the body shape pressing above the tightly clinging leather clothes was splendid as well. But there were pointed ears hanging atop her head, and around the back of her buttocks, there was a long, gently swaying tail.

She was like a woman in a cat costume that occasionally appeared in mature content magazines.

As the girl stared at him with round eyes, she abruptly opened her mouth.

“I’m Jana. You?”

“Uh? I-I’m Ark.”

“I’m just askin’ just in case, but you’re a human, right?”

When Ark nodded with a dazed expression, Jana spun around.

“I didn’t know a human would really come... anyway, follow me.”

Ark didn’t know how to respond and was vacantly apathetic.

“Well, since there doesn’t seem to be any hostility.”

In the end, Ark put away his sword and followed that woman’s pendulous tail.

Cats followed closely all around him. The sight of the cats holding their heads high and marching, as if they were escorting a prisoner, made the tension in his body crumble away all at once, and laughter bubbled out.

After walking about 30 minutes, a space diffused with hazy light appeared.

About fifteen people who looked like Jana were gathered in the center of a space teeming with a hundred cats, and an elder of enormously large stature was sitting in the middle.

Her being large was one thing, though that didn’t mean she was packed full of muscles. It meant she had a tight figure, like an ad balloon.

Of course, there were cat ears and a tail attached to her too.

“The hell, what is this? Cosplay land? Is that what this is?”

In New World, Beast was also a race that users could choose. However, normally a Beast was made based on a wolf. He had never heard of a cat race.

In that time, Jana approached the elder and whispered something.

The elder asked with a slightly surprised expression, “Come quickly, stranger. I am the elder of the Meow; they call me Hassan. Is it true that you used a skill of the Meow?”

“Skill of the Meow?”

“The heroic cat’s strength that completely dominates mice.”

‘So she was talking about the Spirit of the Cat.’

“Yes, is there some kind of a problem?”

Ark’s voice was slightly unfriendly.

He’d suffered from Debra, Haverstein had died, and he had been beaten here after struggling in a cave in the middle of nowhere. Though this wasn’t as bad as reality, he was beginning to feel slight pain even within the game. So even for Ark, there was no reason for good words to come out.

However, Hassan opened his mouth again as if that didn’t matter.

“Where did you learn that skill?”

“I learned it when I received the title.”

“Title?”

“It is a title called Mouse Master.”

“Mouse Master!”

Hassan’s eyes widened. His ears and tail also sprang up. He was exactly the picture of a fat cat in shock.

That wasn’t all. The people and cats that had gathered in their surroundings also stared at Ark with wide eyes.

“Since ancient times, the title of Mouse Master was only bestowed onto a valiant one who killed a Black Bear Mouse. But the Black Bear Mouse is already a race that has become extinct. What’s left is Debra’s henchman. Even so, if you received the Mouse Master title... are you saying that you killed Debra’s henchman?”

“Debra’s henchman? I’m not sure, but it’s true that I killed Black Bear Mouse.”

“Are you telling the truth? Th-then didn’t you see the slate there, by any chance?”

“Are you talking about this?”

Ark pulled out the slate without much consideration.

It was an item that had already served its purpose of opening the door to Debra’s chamber. But Hassan ogled the slate with deeply moved eyes, rushed to embrace Ark, and rubbed him with his balloon-like body.

“You came, you finally came! I knew you would come! Truthseeker!”

“What are you saying? What’s wrong? What’s a Truthseeker again?”

There wasn’t a man out there who would be happy with this elder attacking him with his whole body.

As Ark grimaced and pushed her away, Hassan scratched his head with a slightly sheepish expression.

“Ah, I was a little excited and made a fool of myself. Okay, that’s right. You probably don’t know the situation properly yet. Of course you don’t know. But don’t worry. Because I’ll slowly explain it to you.”

Hassan returned to sit in his chair again and began speaking.

“As you can see, we are Maban, Beast. Even among them, we are the honorable Meow who serve the Cat Sage. The ruin above us was originally our temple. However, Debra suddenly appeared dragging along monsters, and it was snatched away from us. Then, fearing our strength, the bastard imprisoned the rest of us in a place like this.”

“Imprisoned? You were imprisoned here?” Ark asked with a dumb expression. Then did that mean this place was a prison? The place he had flown to riding the opportune Warp to was a prison?

Then didn’t that also mean there wasn’t a way out?

In any case, Hassan continued. “To be safe, Debra, fearing we might escape the prison, entrusted the key to his henchman and went and sealed it in a faraway wilderness.”

At that moment, Ark was shocked into attention.

“Key? Then this slate...”

“Yes, that slate is the one and only key that can open all the doors in the temple. And the Black Bear Mouse you defeated was definitely the henchman who ran away with the key.”

Ark’s face brightened. If that was the case, now it wasn’t even a problem to find the way out. He could afford to be relieved.

“I clearly grasp the situation. However, I can’t understand.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have already fought with Debra once. It was close to invincible, an absurdly powerful bastard. But for that kind of guy to fear your strength and imprison you, and even seal the key far away is something that I can’t understand?”

At Ark’s words, Hassan’s face filled with pride.

“That’s because we are descendants of Hero Maban.”

“Hero Maban?”

“Oh, you don’t know?”

A disappointed look flashed over Hassan’s face.

“Hero Maban was one among the 7 heroes who saved the past continent from crisis. In other words, shall we say he was one of the strongest warriors in the continent? And we are the tribe who has served that Hero Maban since long ago. Well, that’s not the only reason why Debra fears us...”

Hassan, who darkened at the mere thought of Debra, bared his teeth slightly.

“Since long ago, warriors have revered that Hero Maban and have followed his footsteps. The Meow call those people Truth-Seekers and

are entrusted with the role of guiding them to the right path. But in order to become a Truthseeker, there is a stage that one must pass first.”

“A stage one must pass?”

“Yes, Hero Maban is the hero the Meow worship. To see whether one is qualified to follow his footsteps, one must first receive the Meow’s test. Its first stage can be passed by killing at least ten thousand of what can be called the Meow’s natural enemy, Mice. Only when that is possible can one be said to have begun the first step as a Truthseeker.”

“Ten thousand Mice!”

That was the task he had finished as a quest he’d received from Harun Village. But he had never dreamed that it might be the path to becoming a Truthseeker.

“But that’s not all. To receive recognition as a true Truthseeker, one must topple what the Meow can call their greatest enemy, the Black Bear Mouse. With that, as friends of the Meow whose hearts are filled with hatred and anger towards mice, you were able to receive the qualification to step into the path of the Truthseeker. That’s why you were able to learn a skill of the Meow.”

Hassan spoke out with a serious expression.

At first, the Meow and the cats had shown interest in him with sparkling eyes. But they must have become bored quickly, because they were stretched out and yawning as they pleased. Seeing this, it seemed that cats understood the phrase “however they pleased.” Anyways, Ark roughly understood the situation up until now.

“That’s why I knew that a Truthseeker like you would appear in front of us one day. Since the Black Bear Mouse left in the outside world is none other than Debra’s henchman.”

Thu-thu-thump.

When Hassan's words ended, the information window popped up.

You have untangled all the complicated secrets of the ancient relic Mysterious Slate.

Intelligence has increased by 10, Fame has increased by 100.

You have acquired a new stat.

Knowledge of Ancient Relics (+10): New knowledge of researching ancient relics has come into your hands.

New World is a continent that guards many legends and secrets that haven't been uncovered yet. By collecting an ancient relic, it has become possible for you to discover this world's hidden secrets, one by one.

This kind of knowledge will provide yet another branching quest for requests that have been entrusted to you, and depending on the situation, it will help you receive a greater reward. Stat distribution is impossible, and if you acquire an ancient relic or discover a hidden truth, the stat will increase.

'Oh, what's this? There's this kind of bonus too?'

Ark's jaw dropped. Because he had already inwardly set his heart on a combat-related profession, it was a shame the bonus stat was the unnecessary Intelligence, but wasn't it free anyway? On top of that, since he had gotten fame as well, he felt like he could fly, he was so happy. But the messages didn't end there.

You have obtained information about the ancestor of the Meow, Hero Maban.

With this, you have taken the first step as a Truthseeker to following the footsteps of the legendary warrior, Hero Maban. It is possible to job change to Dark Walker, the unique profession of a Truthseeker.

If you change your profession, it will become possible to learn the inherent skills of a Dark Walker. In addition, as a profession characteristic, there are also cases where you cannot learn some common skills.

Would you like to change profession?

'So there is even a related job change with the Secret of the Slate quest!'

Ark's heart thumped wildly.

This was one of the hidden professions he'd only heard about!

Although he had played many online games up 'til now, this was the first time he had personally found one.

Hidden professions typically received higher additional stat bonuses than common professions. Given the extreme difficulty of finding one, this reward was a matter of course. Also, there were unique skills only obtainable in a hidden profession, and with their use, one could demonstrate incredible strength.

That was the reason why users didn't upload information about hidden professions.

Although there was the greed of wanting to monopolize hard-found information, more than that, the reason for hiding a distinctive skill only obtainable in a hidden profession was even greater. When users get into a fight amongst each other, if the opponent didn't know the other side's skill, then even that would be a huge help.

'This is an incredible opportunity!'

His excitement was great after all. But Ark hesitated for a moment.

If he thought about it carefully, it wasn't only a good thing.

So to speak, a hidden profession was partly a specialized profession, so there were many cases where the abilities leaned to one side. If a person who wanted to become a Magician happened to find a magic-specialized hidden profession, then they would be able to enjoy an enormous additional effect.

But if a warrior style user found the same magic hidden profession, it wouldn't simply be an extremely upsetting situation. In the end, becoming a character that wasn't one or the other wasn't a small possibility. Since users didn't share information, it wasn't possible to check that point before job changing.

‘The risk is pretty high. Argh.’

If he made a risky mistake with his one and only character, it would be the end.

However, it was too much of a shame to reject a hidden profession he had found after all of this.

He had come this far struggling with an absolutely impossible quest at level 15, when it was usually possible to change professions. That meant it was a profession that required at least that much ability. Then the extra ability and skill were probably not that extraordinary...

‘Although I can’t know what type of profession it is from just the name... since she said Hero Maban was a legendary warrior, won’t it be combat-related? Alright, let’s believe that!’

In the end, Ark finished hesitating and shouted, “Yes!”

Around him, Ark was embraced with an aura of splendid light.

“Hm, that’s a good light in your eyes. It’s a light that has received the strength of the Meow and has resolved to live on as a Truth-Seeker. I like it. Truth-Seekers have been the Meow’s friends since long ago. Now you are our friend. To you, the one who defeated the Black Bear Mouse and brought us the slate, we dub thee an honorable knight and will call you ‘Cat Knight.’”

Hassan smiled contentedly as she wagged her tail.

You have received the title of Cat Knight from Hassan, elder of the Meow.

As a knight of the Meow, you can harbor friendships with all the Meow. When fighting Mice, 75% additional Attack Power is applied, chance of successfully landing a fatal blow increased to 50%, damage taken reduced by 50%. (50% applies to small monsters as well.)

\*As a bonus from the title, all stats are increased by 2 each.

\*Fame has increased by 150.

\*You have gained the attribute of the Meow. (All abilities + 30% when fighting small monsters.)

\*It has become possible to communicate in language with all the cats of the Continent.

\*Damage from falling can be reduced by 50%.

The Cat Knight's specialized skill, Spirit of the Cat, has been increased to Advanced.

Spirit of the Cat (Advanced): The cat's roar and sharp eyes can make all small monsters tremble in terror. 1 minute paralysis, Attack Power and Defense, Morale drop 30% (In the case of small monsters, even if they are boss monsters, 50% of the effect still applies.)

Mana consumption: 120

You have learned a new skill.

Eyes of the Cat(Beginner, Active): You can penetrate and see through the darkness with a cat's eyes. In addition, you can see an opponent's Health, Mana, and weakness. 3 minute duration + Night vision. + Life detection. + Weakness perception. Mana consumption: 50

Ark's eyes widened.

His stats hadn't changed at despite having already changed profession. The Mana that had gone up by 50 was just from solving the Secret of the Slate, along with the 10 increased Intelligence. At most all he had gained was learning Eyes of the Cat, and raising Spirit of the Cat to Advanced.

'No, no way!'

Ark let loose a scream inside. Although common professions were also a little different, with a job change, you received a stat bonus of at least 30.

The specialized skills were also the same. Even as a warrior, who had fewer skills than a Magician, an extra 4~5 of them formed. But what the hell was this?

Then, without knowing Ark's feelings, Hassan put on a delighted expression.

"Oh ho ho, by your expression, it seems you're shocked by the might of Hero Maban."

'This wretch... I was deceived by this bastard's talk of Hero Maban or whatever...!'

Ark complained as his rage surged up.

"What is this? Although I've decided to live on as a Truthseeker, not much has changed!"

"Ah, do you need that after all?"

Hassan spoke as if he had thought of it for the first time.

"Actually, this temple is guarding a treasure that Hero Maban left for the Truth-Seekers. From that treasure, the Truthseekers gained the strength to find Hero Maban's footsteps."

'So that heritage has to come into my hands to complete the job change?'

The new information made his ears perk up.

Ark asked with an urgent tone, "Where is that heritage?"

"Debra was after that treasure since long ago. Even the reason why the bastard stole the temple..."

"That's fine, so where is it!"

"Since the bastard took the temple, of course Debra has it."

“What?”

Ark’s face went pale.

He had already plentifully experienced how powerful Debra was. It was an opponent that the Sylphid Knights, which were that strong, couldn’t win against even when they all charged at it. No, it was something invincible. How in the world was he to topple Debra and regain the heritage?

However, Hassan replied with a confident expression.

“Don’t worry. Since you found the key, Debra and the like aren’t even a problem. Like I said, the bastard locked us up because it feared us. That’s not purely because we are descendants of Maban. It’s because there’s a slightly more fundamental problem.”

“Wha-what is that?”

“We are the bastard’s natural enemy.”

Hassan bared his teeth and grinned wickedly.

You have met the Meow, who repulsed the Dream Weaver Debra and were locked up by it. You must defeat Debra with them and regain Hero Maban’s treasure. Difficulty: + EQuest requirement: Only a user with the Cat Knight title may receive it.

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“The key! Where is the key!” Debra screamed as it rooted through the corpses of the Knights.

Right then, a stone gate situated in a corner of the hall opened and Ark walked in.

“You’re looking for the key?”

The place the Meow were locked in was right underneath the hall.

Debra recoiled at the sight of Ark.

“How, how did you...?”

“The key is right here.”

As Ark raised the slate from his bag, Debra’s eyes became bleary with madness.

Incredible terror blazed in its eyes as it charged toward Ark. Ark simply watching Debra with a very strained expression. Then, when Debra was up in front of his nose, he shouted with all his strength.

“Spirit of the Cat!”

Nyaaaaa-!

A black cat form appeared over his head along with a piercing cry.

After becoming a Cat Knight, the skill went up to Advanced, and the black cat had become 5 times bigger than it was when it was Intermediate.

As the nearly lion-sized black cat glared with golden eyes, the glowering Debra’s movements suddenly stopped. And as it convulsed with shivers, it stared at Ark with disbelieving eyes.

“Ku-kuhhuk! You’re a hu-human, how did you...!”

‘Hassan’s words were the truth after all!’

“The time is now! Attack the bastard!”

Nya, nya, nya, nya, nya, nyang!

As Ark shouted, the Meow and hundreds of cats poured out from behind the stone gate. The cats that traversed the hollow at an extreme speed covered Debra and scratched him with their fangs and claws. Debra shook his whole body and burst out in shrieks. Then, at

that moment, its mantle suddenly swayed and the black object abruptly dropped to the ground.

His entire body was covered with a furry mass of cats.

‘The body has finally been revealed!’

Hassan’s confidence had no doubt stemmed from knowing about Debra’s body.

Debra’s body was a Gremlin that had received strength from an Illusion spell.

[T/N: Gremlins are small and often extremely ugly in appearance. They are known for their propensity for mischievous acts.]

That’s why it had brought along disease and famine to the Jackson territory, and could not help but instinctively fear the natural enemies of small monsters, cats and the Meow.

Debra feared of having his body’s true form revealed.

That it had sealed the temple’s key far away and had hidden the physical body it had made with illusions were also due to the same reason.

Unaware of this, the Sylphid Knights had fought the illusion the bastard had created. Of course its health hadn’t dropped and it had appeared immortal. The aura of horror he had thought had plunged the Knights in confusion was also actually an illusion. No wonder it had been impossible to clear it with magic.

‘But the truth is just this kind of small monster...’

Debra staggered to its feet and stared at Ark.

“You, you bastard... how can a human use skill of the Meow...?”

“You cowardly mouse shit, you still haven’t figured it out? He’s a Truth-Seeker.”

Hassan smiled sweetly as he tore away at the illusion of Debra.

The illusion of Debra was not even able to move properly because it was covered with the cat swarm.

“Wha-what? Then surely not...?”

“It means he’s the natural owner of that power you had so anxiously desired.”

“S-shut up! That strength is mine! I won’t give it to anyone!”

Debra screamed violently and rushed towards Ark.

With the Advanced Spirit of the Cat, at the most 50% of the effect was applied, even on bosses like the Gremlin. Although it couldn’t completely paralyze its movement, Debra continued to be in a slowed state.

“Ark, the bastard can no longer use the strength of the Dream while we’re holding on. We’ll block the apparition, so quickly finish the bastard off. Everyone attack all-out!”

Nya, nya, nya, nya, nyang!

The cats and Meow let loose yowls devoid of fear and concentrated their attack on the illusion of Debra.

There wasn’t a free quest in the world after all. He had thought he’d be able to reap it in after Debra’s real body had been revealed because the cats and Meow were helping, but in the end Debra was Ark’s responsibility.

Ark delivered a hard kick to the charging Debra and violently swung his sword.

“Kyak!”

With the feeling of the sword lodging itself, Debra stumbled.

When Ark fought with the bastard's henchman, Black Bear Mouse, his sword hadn't really penetrated. But Debra had suffered a great number of blows. Moreover, with the Spirit of the Cat applied, its movement was slowed. When it was blanketed in the illusion, it had given off the feeling of being invincible, but now that the illusion was stripped away, it was weaker than its subordinate.

'If it's just this much, I should be able to fight it no matter what!'

Ark directed flashing eyes toward Debra.

"Eyes of the Cat!"

As soon as the skill was activated, Ark's eyes were colored with golden light.

Health appeared atop Debra's head, and red points formed on places here and there on its body.

They were Debra's weaknesses that he had detected with Eyes of the Cat. If he focused his attacks on the red points, additional attack power would be applied, as well as a high probability of critical hits.

It was a skill perfectly suited for Ark's fighting style!

"Kyak! Keeeeeeee!"

Ark spun around Debra and consecutively thrust in his sword.

Every time he did so, Debra shook its body like crazy as it swung its cane, but it only struck at the tough ground. Soon 1 minute had passed and the Spirit of the Cat effect should have released, but the bastard's attacks still couldn't hit Ark.

'But why is something they call a boss this weak? Is it 'cus because the illusion wore off?'

In fact, it was to the point that Ark became more bewildered. But that

was thanks to the ability, which he hadn't realized. The attribute of the Meow he had acquired through the profession change. His abilities increased by 30% when he fought all small monsters. That meant it applied to level, attack power, defense, and of course all skills and equipment effects.

Although Ark's level was 16, he was enjoying the effect of actually being level 25. In addition, Dream Weaver Debra's attribute was a Magician. Since a Magician was only able to block spells, it was no different from an ordinary Gremlin boss. As a boss, even if it were a Gremlin with enhanced abilities, Ark could definitely fight it by himself.

Ark's excitement grew anyways.

His body was as light as a feather and it wasn't that bothersome to swing the sword.

Even then, Ark continued and pressed against Debra. Every time he struck a red point, its life dropped bit by bit. After 10 minutes had passed, Debra's body turned red.

It had fallen into critical condition!

Of course, no matter how highly skilled he was, Ark couldn't avoid all the attacks. He would occasionally suffer an attack, and his Health would be cut down to half. The mana that had reached rock bottom was completely restored again with his skill use.

Ark's eyes flashed.

"Spirit of the Cat!"

The sharp yowl pierced right through Debra's body.

Once again, its movements was slowed as it convulsed. Ark bent his body low to avoid the flying front paw and struck its leg. The leg broke without resistance, and Debra toppled to one side.

Ark thrust his sword downwards towards Debra's completely exposed throat.

"This is your end, Debra!"

You have struck a fatal blow!

As the sword pierced the throat, Debra, who received extreme damage, quivered violently. Its tongue stuck and lolled out. Debra and the illusion Debra had made gradually faded and completely disappeared.

'I defeated it!'

Although the true body's skill level was no different than the Demon Mouse, Debra was an extremely high level boss monster.

Actually, this ruin was already a place open to the public. However, no one had been able to take down Debra. First of all, the reason was that it was impossible to break Debra's illusion without the slate.

That was why the quest had specified that only a Cat Knight could do it.

Anyways, his level went up by 3 in a single burst with Debra's defeat.

And as a message that he had completed the 'Defeat Dream Weaver Debra' quest popped up, he gained yet another level, bringing him up to level 20.

"We finally had our revenge against Debra. You are now our hero! This is a small token of our sincerity."

Hassan approached him and extended gloves covered with shaggy fur that went up to the elbow.

The Meow and the cats shouted as they pranced about.

Within this scene that lacked any tension, Ark smiled wryly and examined his booty.

A mantle from which dark red light flowed was lying where the illusion had disappeared, and there was a jewel-encrusted hand mirror and an orb of five colors lying in the place where Debra had been.

“Information window!”

Five-Colored Orb: An orb filled with a part of Hero Maban’s strength.

Jewel Hand Mirror: Starting item for a level 40 quest.

‘I’ve hit jackpot!’

It appeared that defeating Debra had been a quest where it was possible to obtain a profession exclusive item. Even so, that he had gotten the Mantle was an enormous harvest.

That he had obtained a rare item in the New World when it had only started its service for two months was like picking a star from the sky. Unfortunately, there was the bad point of the cut stats, considering the special option, it seemed like it would have enormous value.

He had finally received the reward of rewards.

‘On top of that, now the quest where I just have to report in is left.’

The quest he'd gotten from Haverstein would be completed if he just left the ruin now.

'Before that, there's something I've gotta do first.'

Ark quickly grasped the Five-colored Orb and raised it to close to his forehead. In the next moment, light of five colors surged out from the Orb and enveloped Ark.

You have learned a new Profession skill.

Dark Blade (Beginner, Active): Assimilate your sword with the darkness and deal your opponent a delightful blow. A sword assimilated with the darkness ignores all physical defenses. Critical hit chance, critical hit attack power 150%. Ignores defense.

Mana consumption: 100 (There is a 1% chance of an instant kill if you use Dark Blade on an enemy in critical condition affected by Eyes of the Cat.)

You have learned a new Profession skill.

Summon Demon (Beginner, Active): You can summon up to three minor demons that wander the world between Middle Earth and Hell. The summoned creatures are currently each at level 1, and consumes the player's Mana. If a Familiar dies and is forcibly deported back to its world, you will suffer a blow equal to 50% of the Familiar's max Health and cannot resummon for 24 hours.

Spiritual Consumption: 100

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"From Father...!"

The boy clutched the Blood-stained Silver Necklace tightly.

Ark watched the sight with sad eyes.

After overthrowing Debra, Ark gathered the survivors of the Sylphid Knights, who had been scattered in the ruin, and returned to Jackson Castle. Then, he pulled out the silver necklace for the fifteen year old son of Haverstein.

The boy that was to become lord after Haverstein did not show any tears. He only gazed at the necklace with bloodshot eyes and his throat just quivered a few times.

He was a strong boy.

“Ark, did Father pass away honorably?”

“Yes, he was more courageous than anyone, and was also a person who truly loved his son.”

“... Thank you.”

The young Lord nodded his head and looked at Ark.

“Ark, you nursed Father throughout the exploration of the ruin, watched over Father’s death, and relayed the silver necklace to me in order to honor your promise with Father. Also, with surprising bravery you defeated Debra and saved my life. This accomplishment cannot be expressed in words and cannot be repaid with any amount of reward.”

“That’s right. He knows it well.’

Ark put on a pleased smile and nodded.

The young Lord fiercely shook his head.

“But I will not give you any reward!”

‘What? This, this little! What nonsense did he spout just now?’

“That Father entrusted you with the Blood-stained Silver Necklace means that he thought of you as a true friend! I dare not dirty that relationship with a material reward. I believe he would have definitely thought of you this way.”

Ark shook his head as if he'd gone mad. But even though it was Ark, he couldn't just say ‘That's not true. I like a material reward’ to a young Lord to whom Ark had delivered news of his father's death. Ark tried his hardest to put on an awkward smile.

“Yes... well... even so...”

“Ark, a friend of my Father is also a friend of mine. Although there is nothing I can give, I give this vow to you here and now. If there is ever a time when you need my strength, I will rush over even to the end of the continent without hesitation!”

“Ah, yes... thank you.”

‘He's saying he won't give me anything in the end! He's just making up for it with his mouth!’

Ark nodded with an expression that looked like he was about to cry.

The difficulty was a whopping +E. Of course, though he had solved it on the side with the profession-changing quest! He'd even received experience and his level had gone up by 1! Even so! He couldn't receive even a whit of reward for a quest of that difficulty even though he'd completed it. What kind of crappy nonsense was this!

He felt as if he'd been scammed.

However, he couldn't just go into a rage when the young Lord had declared his speech that passionately.

‘Unbelievable, you call it friendship? Whether it's father or son, they're too rigid...’ Ark grumbled as he trudged out of the castle.

In the end, he hadn't fished out even 1 copper. Still, he wasn't in a bad enough mood to spew his anger.

Rather, should he call it a cleansing feeling?

"ATTENTION!"

As he passed the area of the door, he heard a booming command. Ark raised his head in alarm to find scores of soldiers even decked out in their uniforms lined up on the castle gate.

As Ark wondered what the hell was going on, the General of Defense Cross yelled out a command as he nodded slightly.

"SALUTE!"

The soldiers pulled out their swords and raised them to the sky.

Ark stood there with a momentarily perplexed expression before he suddenly felt a gaze directed at him and raised his eyes to the castle rampart.

In the window, the young Lord was watching him with a glowing face and a gentle smile. His eyes said a lot. Ark watched the young Lord for a moment and shook his head from side to side.

"I knew it, this game's NPCs are all too rigid."

A wry smile appeared on Ark's face as he passed through the soldiers.

The sunlight shining on the rim of his ears was warm, and the gentle wind refreshed him.

Truly... it wasn't a bad feeling.

Users gathered from the valley to sightsee this rare event.

# Familiars

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“Damn it.”

He subconsciously swore out loud.

In conclusion, the job change was a mistake.

Ark disliked hunting in a party. There wasn’t a single person he could trust, and their attitudes could change over a single valuable magic item, leading to an argument. He found these sorts of situations repulsive. Rather than suffering from such mess, he was far more comfortable hunting alone, even if it was a little more difficult.

This was the reason why Ark preferred a combat-relation profession.

Thieves who stab their enemies’ weak point, or Magicians who boast of having power to deal a one hit fatal blow weren’t bad either. However, these professions could only genuinely shine in parties.

On the other hand, although Warriors weren’t all that special, and didn’t particularly have any exceptional skill, they had high Stamina and Defense. That wasn’t all — they also received bonus bag space and in addition, they had resistance to all sorts of ailments. Thus, it wasn’t wrong to say they were professions perfect for soloing.

But the profession ‘Dark Walker’ was closer to a Thief than a Warrior.

Dark Walker, one who walks the night. He should have guessed when he heard the name.

It was a matter of fact that the profession’s bonus stats focused on, Agility, Intelligence, and Luck. But even then, all the additional stats were evenly matched to a Thief’s.

No, it'd be better to be a regular Thief. If you debate about it, a Thief is a combat-related profession. If you look at the Summoning skill, or the Intelligence stat bonuses, it seems like this profession included a Magician's traits to some degree.

'Agility is fine, since it influences critical hits, attack speed, and evasion rate, but Intelligence and Luck? In the end, it's unclear whether it's a Thief-related or Magician-related profession, or maybe even a Cleric.'

Hybrid-characters. They sound good and all, but in reality, it just means they were neither one, nor the other.

With the additional stats totalled to 60, he had gained a bonus amount doubled that of a standard job-change for a normal profession.

There was nothing problematic stat-wise. However, there were a lot of cases where stat bonuses added by a job change influenced the profession's ability as a whole. This meant that whether he liked it or not, he would have to diligently raise those three stats...

'And whose fault is it? The one who jumped the fence after hearing of a hidden profession was me. It was my mistake.'

He let out a stifled sigh.

But what could he do about the profession he had already chosen?

Similar to how he was mice hunting in Harun, if Ark focused on one thing, he had the propensity to obstinately dig his heels in. Be as it may, he was quick to give up if he thought he couldn't do anything about the situation.

At this moment, the situation was exactly the same. In any case, he couldn't turn back time even if he regretted it. So he thought he should make the best out of the current mishap to try and understand the Dark Walker profession and its special characteristics, and quickly adapt to it with the best of his abilities.

‘No, it’s still a hidden profession. It’s because I’ve been thinking about being Warrior too much. It’s probably not all that bad. If I nurture the profession’s advantages, I’m sure I’ll find more good points. Okay, calm down and examine it carefully. First of all, it seems fundamentally similar to a Thief. Summoning is definitely one of this profession’s unique point. In other words, the profession’s nature will be decided depending on how Summoning is used, right?’

Anyhow, he could summon up to three Demons that he could handle at will.

‘If I use these guys, won’t I be able to hunt solo?’

“Summon Demon.”

Ark welled with expectation and called out the Summon skill, spending the newly formed Spiritual Power points. However, as soon as he examined the Familiar he summoned, the speck of expectation in his heart crumbled to bits.

‘Wha-what is this. This is?’

The summoned Familiar appeared with a blinding flash was just a skull.

The Skull briefly checked its surroundings with eyes of hazy light. It discovered Ark and chattered its teeth together, making a clattering sound.

Ark hastily opened the information window.

Nameless Dead Man’s Skull

The skull of a  
low-class dead  
man that had  
been wandering  
in the  
Netherworld.

There is nothing

special about it.  
However, it  
holds  
unwavering  
loyalty for the  
master who  
saved it from the  
Netherworld.

~~Haglund~~  
~~Death~~  
~~Doalygh~~  
~~Morlina~~  
~~Widogren~~  
Duck

In other words, apart from its loyalty, it was a bloke no different from a pebble on the roadside.

“Are you kidding me? If it doesn’t have an ability, it should at least have been pretty.”

He exploded in anger, but the Skull simply tumbled around. Ark grinded his teeth as he restored his Spiritual Power and called out the two remaining Familiars.

Hatred-Bearing Bat  
A low-class Bat  
ostracized in the  
Netherworld.  
Having suffered  
rejection for a  
long time, it  
bears frustration  
and hatred  
towards the  
world. Because  
of its hatred, it  
cannot be  
completely loyal

to its master. To expect its loyalty, you must first gain its trust.

~~Ragiment~~

~~Stash~~

~~Soyalgh~~

~~Aqimya~~

~~Melodgence~~

Duck

'Oh great, now it's a loser bat?'

A Hatred-bearing Bat? He had to gain its trust? There really were all kinds of crap. However, compared to the familiar that appeared last, the first two were aristocracy.

Netherworld's Egg

A firm shelled egg all high-class Demonic beings of the Netherworld enjoyed eating.

~~Ragiment~~

~~Stash~~

~~Soyalgh~~

~~Aqimya~~

~~Melodgence~~

Duck

Upon seeing the egg appearing before him, he omitted all feelings of wanting to be angry.

'An egg? What exactly could you use it for? So what if it's as firm as a rock? Is it asking to be thrown?'

With these three Familiars in front of him, he couldn't fathom what

the hell they were used for. Ark was stunned.

Hidden professions usually had two types of natures.

One, they held the possibility of becoming a hero through their exceptional abilities. While the other was a profession made through an event for fun and games, which was no more than just a unique profession.

By the looks of it, it appeared the profession Ark had found was of the latter type.

He did think the three Familiars he summoned were interesting, but that was all there was to it.

They weren't even Halloween decorations... What help would a Skull, Bat, and Egg be?

However, there wasn't anything that could be done about it.

In New World, a one-time choice would determine one's fate. In a way, it was more cold-hearted than reality. In a world such as this, having already made his choice, there was no way to turn back.

"Huhuhuhu."

An absurd laugh escaped Ark's lips.

Ark quickly gave up. But it wasn't the '*whatever happens, happens*' kind of surrender.

Someone once said '*If you can't avoid it, enjoy it*'. It's quite a famous saying.

Ark had lived with those words engraved in his heart. That's why no matter what situation he was in, he had never pitied himself before. If he harbored even a morsel of self-pity, he wouldn't have been able to endure until now.

“The penalty in Harun Village, and then changing my profession to an unwanted one. With so many failures, I can’t even get angry anymore. Alright, let’s give it a try. Bad luck? Don’t make me laugh. Without fail, I’m gonna try turning this ridiculous character into a Warrior.”

If the profession wasn’t satisfactory, he just had to raise his level more than others. If raising his level wasn’t enough, then he could also raise his skill like crazy.

New World was a game with high degrees of freedom.

Just because he’d selected his profession didn’t mean that it would decide everything. Even if it wasn’t a special technique, there were plenty of common skills he could learn. With a close choice from that boundless array, he could shape the way his character developed in all sorts of manners.

Although there were cases where a lot of penalties were applied because of the profession, there were more skills he could learn than skills he couldn’t learn.

A Warrior-type Magician. Thief-type Warrior, etc... that meant with effort, making a versatile Multi-Character wasn’t just impossible, but what he had to believe in now was just that endless freedom.

“If I’ve made my decision, there’s no time to sit around.”

Ark sprang up and headed to the hunting ground.

Level 20-30 monsters he could catch were scattered in the Jackson area. Currently, Ark’s level was 21.

It was good enough to set Jackson as his base and do his grinding.

“Haaayaahh!”

From that day on, Ark immersed himself hunting in day and night.

The opponent Ark had chosen in the beginning was a mud monster called Harpoon. Its body was made of mud, so he couldn't strike it with his sword very well, and it had a lot of health inconsistent with its level, 20. However, it wasn't a difficult monster to fight because it moved slowly.

When the fighting started, Ark won easily with a strategy of unleashing waves of attacks while circling the area around the Harpoon.

When the Harpoon collapsed, it dropped Iron Ore, an item that fetched a really nice price at the Smithy.

If his Health didn't fall below half, Ark wouldn't take a break. Only when his bag was filled bursting or his equipment's durability had fallen to 5 or below did he return briefly to Jackson to address those matters.

Besides that, the rest of the time was solely devoted to bloody battles with monsters! Despite that, Ark didn't feel fatigue. No matter how tough or tired he was, all his needs washed away with the cheerful sound of a level up.

After hanging on, frantically hunting like that for two days, his level went up by another 3, bringing him to 24. His combat-only skills, Sword Mastery and Hand-to-Hand Combat, went up considerably and were now at Intermediate as well. With that, the two skills combined and a new message information window popped up.

Sword Mastery and Hand-to-Hand Combat have reached the maturity of an expert. Accordingly, the two techniques have combined to allow you to register Sword-Hand Combat as a legal skill.

Note, if Sword-Hand Combat is registered as a legal skill, Sword Mastery and Hand-to-Hand Combat will be automatically deleted.

**Sword-Hand Combat (Beginner, Passive):** The technique that experts of Sword Mastery and Hand-to-Hand Combat use.

Although you cannot equip a shield along with it, it is an advanced combat technique that thoroughly combines deftness and keenness. It grants you additional attack power with all types of swords and

knuckle-related weapons, and your evasion and critical hit rate will increase rapidly. General attack power is increased by 20%. Sword-Hand Combat's effect dissolves shield equipping.

A new stat has formed. Flexibility (+10): Your body becomes more flexible, allowing you to perform difficult movements skillfully.

Your evasion is heightened and you receive extra points if your attack hits the mark. However, if you equip iron armor, a certain amount of the worn equipment's effect will drop.

Stat distribution is impossible, and if you succeed in performing evasion movements of difficult techniques, it will increase automatically.

Ark's eyes lit up.

Was there anything that made a user happier when it came down to a character's growth?

With the level and skill growth, he could definitely feel himself getting stronger. Hand-to-Hand Combat was a skill especially well suited to Ark's fighting style.

Ark's tactic of leaving enough space, discharge attacks and delivering the finishing blow at the chance were all techniques he'd learned from Taekwondo. If he packed the sensation directly into his sword, he would undoubtedly score a critical hit.

With the skill 'Eyes of the Cat' included, it made his critical hit rate even higher. And because of that, a frenzied battle with exploding critical hits wildly unfurled.

Defeating a monster took less than just 1 minute. Although he was bent on believing that he was a Warrior-type, his fighting style, which measured space and watched for gaps rather than blindly throwing himself in, was closer to a Thief's.

"Alright, I think I can proceed deeper in now."

Ark's eyes looked towards the inner depths of the forest.

In order to ensure one's safety when soloing, one was bound to hunt monsters at a lower level than oneself. Ark had done so until now, but this area's monsters didn't give him the proper amount of experience now. Ark moved forward to find stronger monsters.

However, moving his hunting ground without prior information was a mistake.

As soon as he stepped into the forest depths, he heard a menacing cry. As he raised his head reflexively, Ark's face hardened.

In the dark, he saw five wolves prowling about with their gleaming scarlet eyes.

They had enormous bull-like bodies, black fur like the pitch-black darkness, and knife-like sharp canines. They were Dire Wolves.

'5 Dire Wolves...!'

Dire Wolves were incomparably more powerful than normal Wolves. On top of that, it was now night time. The nocturnal Dire Wolf's ability went up by 30 percent. They were such formidable opponents that it wasn't certain if a level 24 would be able to handle two or three of them. Ark's whole body stiffened rigidly with tension.

'Damn, I was too careless. It's too late to run away now.'

His Taekwondo-trained body judged the situation faster than his mind and moved.

The first move meant victory! It was a method used in kung fu, wrestling, and everywhere else.

Ark reduced the distance rapidly as he swung his sword landing a critical hit, with one Wolf falling back. However, the wolves were also beasts that were proficient at pack hunting. A Wolf ran in and

avenged its companion with the same critical hit to his back, which he'd left neglected as he focused on attacking.

His consciousness reeled.

You have been critically hit! Damage 50.

You have been inflicted with Bleed. Until the battle is over, you will receive 2 damage every 10 seconds.

'So it's insult to injury. Since I'm like this, I'll die after I kill just one more!'

Ark faced the Wolf throng as he unleashed Sword-Hand Combat. He swung his sword wildly and clawed with his Cat Paws. He even rolled on the ground, sprang up, and whipped out kicks.

After 10 minutes of the bloody battle, three wolves collapsed. But Ark, who was inflicted with Bleed, also had to pay a price.

'Huff huff huff, only 20 percent of my Health is left.'

"Eyes of the Cat."

As he used the skill, Ark's eyes turned into golden cat eyes. Their halved Healths appeared above the wolves' heads.

'If it goes well, I might even be able to win.'

Just when Ark had momentarily released his tension, a Wolf who had been watching for its chance didn't miss the opportunity and rushed in.

As it flashed in front of his eyes, his Health plummeted. Ark's body became awash in red. He'd fallen into the critical state. At the same time, message windows popped up continuously.

Indomitable Will and Indomitable Body, which shone more brightly in a crisis, were invoked. Attack power, critical hit and evasion rate

skyrocketed!

'It's a chance!'

His eyes flashed as he thrusted his sword.

Clang, clang! As two critical hits landed in succession, the wolves collapsed.

Then, the remaining one lunged towards his side and charged in. Ark hastily turned his body as he swung his sword. However, fortune and misfortune were a just hair apart.

Your critical hit attack has missed!

If it was a normal attack, there wouldn't have been any reason for it to miss. However, because of his skills triggering automatically when in a critical state, he was in a condition where his critical hit rate was abnormally high. That actually acted negatively. As much as a critical hit gave 2 times the damage, the miss rate was also that heightened.

"Ah, no! If I die now the stats.... SUMMON DEMON! This useless skull. Just do something!"

With his heart clutching at straws, Ark summoned the skull, grabbed it, and threw it.

The skull went flying and clamped onto the Wolf's ankle. Although the damage was just 1, it succeeded in stopping the movements of the Wolf that had rushed in with its bared fangs. It was a chance he'd never even dreamed of.

Ark closed the space in one burst as he thrusted his sword, and a flash exploded out.

You have landed a critical hit.

As a co-op bonus with the Skull, 30% of the damage has been added.

Awoooo!

The Wolf howled its death throes as it collapsed.

It was a miracle-like victory. Ark, who realized that he'd narrowly won, checked and saw that his remaining health was a mere 3. If the battle had dragged on for just 20 more seconds, he would've collapsed from the Bleed. The Bleed had stopped with the end of the battle, but his heart was still thumping violently as it pumped hot blood through his veins.

Arc rushed to a safe place as soon as possible. After recovering his Stamina with a simple snack, he barely managed to calm down.

Ark stared at the Skull with surprised eyes.

Like a puppy begging for praise, the Skull was rolling over and over around him. It was the same Skull that he decided not to summon again because of its disappointing appearance.

It seemed like it wouldn't be any help, and since it would even suck Mana from him during battle, there wasn't really any reason to pull it out. However, his life was saved thanks to the Skull, and his opinion of it had changed.

'At least it's better than nothing.'

"Anyways, I survived thanks to you, Skull."

\*Clack clack clack.\*

The Skull clattered its teeth as if it understood his words.

For the last few days, Ark had been engrossed in hunting. Besides the occasional times when returned to the castle, he was always alone. He hadn't felt it until now because he'd been absorbed in hunting, but he realized yet again that that the forest felt unusually broad and desolate.

“You, I’m really pleased with you.”

For one thing, it seemed like he wasn’t going to be bored if he was with the Skull. Additionally, if it could be a help like the way he’d used it just now, it was perfectly satisfactory. It would consume Mana in battle, but as long as he doesn’t use Spirit of the Cat, he didn’t particularly needed the Mana either.

“Alright, since it’s a skill that I’ve learned, should I try using it properly?”

Ark went ahead and summoned the Bat too.

Once he actually decided to use them, the Familiars had many unexpected uses.

The Bat excelled in scouting the area. If he sent the Bat before he moved in, he could reduce the chances of him being suddenly hemmed in by Wolves. It was also useful for surveying the general terrain.

The Skull and Bat also played a part in battle.

“Go!”

As Ark extended his hand, the Skull and Bat flew towards the Yeti.

The Skull bit the Yeti’s ankle to slow its movement, and the Bat covered its eyes to impede its vision.

Ark leisurely studied the situation and flung his sword. Then, a critical hit burst out with a considerably high rate. On top of that, the co-op attack bonus with the Familiars was added!

Just like that, he would start fighting with the monsters and cut down their health by nearly 20 percent. After getting used to this method, it was now difficult to even imagine a fight without the Familiars.

“Wahahaha, this is as useful as expected!”

Although he still hadn't been able to figure out the Egg's purpose, with just the Skull and the Bat, Ark's hunting speed accelerated. Of course, they weren't that helpful when he was fighting a strong monster. In fact, they were crushed even before he went to the nearby area and even dealt [indirect] damage to Ark's Health.

If the Familiar was destroyed, Ark's Health was also decreased by up to 50% of its Health. But the Familiar's Health was just 50, it wasn't fatal damage, and a destroyed Familiar could also be called forth again any time he wanted after 24 hours.

“Dark Walker, this might even be an unexpectedly okay profession.”

Ark became more and more enamored with the Dark Walker's charm like this.

A character that was neither this nor that could mean that it could do anything.

As he went deeper into the forest, Ark shouted valiantly, “Forward, forward! Let's take down everything!”

\* \* \*

Kyaak!

The Zombie collapsed as it screamed a grotesque shriek.

A message popped up with a cheerful sound effect.

Your level has risen.

**Character Name**

**Abigament**

~~Level~~

~~Profession~~ Walker

~~Title~~ Knight

~~Name~~

~~Special Ability~~ Power

~~Ability~~ (Final 7)

~~Mind~~ Intelligence

~~Body~~ Flexibility

~~Special stat:~~ Knowledge of Ancient Relics

Equipment Effects

Sharply Shining

Sword: Attack

speed +5

Cat Paws: Attack

speed +10%,

Agility +15,

Critical Hit Rate

+10%

\*All abilities are

increased by

20% in the dark.

\*The ability to hide your body in the dark has formed (Duration time 10 minutes. Cancelled if you start fighting).

\*Resistance to horror, darkness, blinding, and charm spells is increased by 50%.

\*You can bring out the true abilities from all types of tools.

‘Phew, it’s harder than I thought.’

Ark’s face was full of sweat, but he was beaming with happiness.

You receive as much reward as your suffering. There wasn’t any reason for him to complain.

As hunting became faster, his mood surged to the peak. Coasting on that mood, Ark entered the deepest part of the forest, called the Shadow Forest.

Among the areas around Jackson, this was the forest with the highest

difficulty.

Even from just its atmosphere, the Shadow Forest was different from other places. Within the darkness that made it difficult to distinguish the path in front of him, the sagging branches of old oaks were intertwined like a net, and there was a bizarre kind of plant blanketing the blackened, dead ground.

The monsters that emerged were also grotesque.

Rotting Wolves, Zombies, and Ghoul-like Undead monsters spawned. Even the weakest Rotting Wolf had a higher level than Ark. Even more so was the occasionally appearing level 50 medium boss monster, Reaper, which he wouldn't even consider approaching.

However, even the Undeads couldn't make the high-spirited Ark afraid.

No, Ark was able to truly really realize the meaning of the name Dark Walker only when he arrived at this rotting forest.

As he entered the dark forest, a message window popped up soon afterwards.

Dark Walker special effect: All abilities increased by 20% in the dark.

Granted, the same effect applied at night as well. However, most of the monsters' stats go up by 30 percent at night. Ultimately, the difference that Ark could actually feel was almost nonexistent. But right now, it was currently day time. Monster stats stayed the same, while Ark's stats rose.

Although Ark's level was 26, he actually had the abilities of a level 30!

Since all of his skills and stats were enhanced, the difference was enormous. Even late level 20s Rotting Wolves were no match for him.

It was to the point that he didn't have a whole lot of difficulty fighting Zombies and Ghouls in their early level 30s.

On top of that, one of his profession techniques was 'Hiding'. Although there wasn't any effect when he was already discovered, but if he used it appropriately, he could leisurely rest in a place crawling with monsters.

A profession which demonstrated its true ability in the dark, that's what Dark Walker profession was. Because of the Dark Walker's special ability, he was able to hunt monsters that Ark couldn't normally defeat at his level.

That wasn't all. When a user defeats a monster 5 levels above theirs, additional experience is granted. With that, the experience that seemed to have stopped before he entered the forest was now surging up.

'It also drops a lot of japtrem, I'm really getting into hunting this Undead.'

Ark was in high spirits.

The Undead monster dropped quite a lot of items. Even so, for the most part they were lumps of rotted meat and the like, but occasionally it also dropped equipment like a dagger, gloves, or shoes.

The japtrem were neatly piling up in his bag. Granted, they were lousy items that would be difficult to sell for even a few coppers if he tried.

However, Ark, who had eked out a living through part-time jobs, knew this. They say that many drops makes an ocean. If you gathered even a few coppers, it would eventually become silver and then gold.

Ark personally equipped a few of them.

Used Worn-out Shoes

~~Leather Shoes~~

~~Defensibility~~

~~Knight~~ Restriction

Shoes used by an Undead for his entire lifetime. The worn and faded leather emanates rotten smell. No matter how skilled a craftsman may be, they will not be able to repair this pairs of shoes to be worth wearing.

Dirty Leather Hat

~~Leather~~ Helmet

~~Defensibility~~

~~Knight~~ Restriction

A leather hat used by an Undead during his lifetime. It's a hat that looks like it would struggle to block a raindrop, let alone a sword.

Stat or appearance, they were too wretched for words. With the tattered shoes and hat on, at a distance who would have been mistaken for a beggar. In addition, the material was made out of leather, so the rotting smell was so bad, it paralyzed the sense of smell.

Ark laughed exultantly nevertheless. Purchasing shoes and a hat that lacked defence from a shop would cost a wasteful 50 silvers, at the very least. It was better to hunt while smelling the rotten scent than to spend 50 silvers.

On top of that, they even had defence, so nothing was left to desire.

Ark was extremely pleased with the Shadow Forest.

He received stat bonus and his experience went up quickly. Useful items sometimes dropped as well. Would there be another place as delightful as this one while playing the game? If he could, he wanted to hunt in the Shadow Forest for several days.

However, a problem he hadn't expected arose. What Ark had actually been worried about was the equipment's durability.

He hadn't learned the repair skill yet, because he hadn't felt the need for it.

After finishing the quest in Jackson, if there was something Ark had earned, it was the right to utilize the Lord's personal facilities. Among those was the Lord's foremost Smithy. If he used that place, they repaired his equipment for half the price of normal Smithies.

Since he'd been hunting around Jackson, there wasn't a need to pay out expensive fee to learn the skill. That's why Ark found it troublesome if the durability was suddenly exhausted in a hunting ground far away from Jackson.

However, an even worse problem occurred in an element he'd truly never expected.

It was food.

Ark had prepared just 10 wheat breads when he left Jackson. Since he had Survival Cooking, he'd planned on acquiring ingredients here and there, making food, and eating. Although he was able to do that in the forest where he last hunted, the Shadow Forest was not an ordinary forest.

Of course he saw tons of food ingredients in the Shadow Forest, but the forest was a place where Undead roamed around in broad daylight. He couldn't find any normal looking food ingredients.

The mushrooms or even the grass looked like eyeballs or intestines. Simply imagining how it would taste or feel to chew made him shudder. No, the taste was fine no matter how it was. The problem was that Ark wouldn't know what kind of effect the cooking he learned would have, a characteristic of Survival Cooking.

'That's definitely dangerous. It has dangerous sign written on it.'

Perhaps it was because the grade of the ingredient was too high, he couldn't figure out its information with his beginner Ingredient Identification skill.

But could he find out by just looking at the information?

They didn't have a skull mark, but they were food ingredients that devoted every fiber of their being to claim they were dangerous.

Ark was able to hunt comfortably in the Shadow Forest thanks to his hiding ability. But if he made the wrong food, ate it, catches a Confusion hex and ran amok, he'd become an Undead's meal right there and then. If it wasn't a safe place, it was better not to make a new Survival Cooking meal.

'I'm gonna go crazy. The wheat bread is already gone, and even my recovery rate has dropped by 50 percent. Eventually, there will be some penalty... Do I have to go all the way back to the village even if it takes 1~2 hours? Or should I put my life on the line and try making and eating it?'

As Ark rummaged in his bag, an ingenious thought suddenly came to mind.

'Of course. Why didn't I think of that?'

"Summon Demon, Netherworld's Egg!"

At Ark's cry, the Egg Familiar appeared.

It was the Familiar Ark hadn't bothered with, because unlike the Skull and Bat, it was a good-for-nothing. Ark had thought there'd be no reason to summon it again, but the Familiar's purpose had finally surfaced.

Ark swallowed his saliva as he gazed at the Netherworld's Egg.

'Even if it's a Familiar or whatever, in the end it's only slightly larger than a normal egg. There's no reason why it can't be used as a food ingredient. Since it was said the Demonic beings also ate it frequently, and an ingredient is an ingredient. An egg will be better than those disgusting ingredients in the forest. And even if a Summon disappears, I can call it again. If it goes well, it might even become an

ingredient I can use limitlessly. I'm sure of it, the Egg's purpose was probably this from the start.'

Ark grinned as he put the Netherworld's Egg in the pot.

"Huhuhu, an egg is a wealth of protein. A meal of enormous effect might even be born."

Then he added a little amount of normal food ingredients he had left and began to boil it.

So how was it? Light spewed from the cooking, which wafted a really reasonable aroma. The message that the cooking had succeeded showed up. Now, all that was left was to taste it.

"Ohhh, it succeeded. It succeeded — Boiled Egg!"

Just as Ark reached out to raise the Egg while humming a tune, all the food inside the pot suddenly vanished. Soon afterward, a message window he'd never seen before popped up along with the gloomy laughter as background music.

You have completed Survival Cooking. However, 'Netherworld's Egg' has absorbed all of it.

There is no effect on Netherworld's Egg. You have not grasped what kind of effect the cooking has.

"Wha-what? Absorb?"

Ark stared at the Egg with a dumbfounded expression.

He needed a considerable amount of time before he was able to understand the situation.

'The egg absorbed the cooking. Then, does that mean the Egg as a whole wasn't used as a cooking ingredient? But absorbed? What the hell does that mean?'

Ark, who had his head tilted sideways, suddenly raised his head.

'What, in the end it means the Egg went and ate the cooking! If so...?'

Ark's line of vision shifted to the Skull.

Ultimately, it meant that Familiars could also eat food! As soon as he realized that, yet another method flashed through his mind like lightning and surfaced. Ark quickly made a new meal.

There was no need to agonize, either. Food ingredients were everywhere around him. He roughly gather food ingredients around him and dumped them inside the pot. After several failures, he completed a soup radiating a peculiar smell.

Ark gestured to the Skull with tender eyes.

"Here, Skull. Try eating this."

*Lei: IT'S A TRAP!*

The Skull stared with sunken eyes and approached him with hesitation.

After dunking itself into the soup, it jumped right out and collapsed.

The Skull shot reproachful looks that said 'why did you do something like this to me' at him and slowly disappeared.

Nameless Dead Man's Skull has received an intense shock. Damage 50!

Nameless Dead Man's Skull has disappeared to the Netherworld. You can summon it again after 24 hours.

The food you made through Survival Cooking is 'Soup of Horrifying Taste'. Just having a sip of it will deal an enormous shock with its incredibly repugnant taste. Wrap it up well and send it to a mean opponent as a present.

“It was as I expected!”

Ark nodded vigorously. Familiars could eat food after all. And after a Familiar of his had eaten the food he made, it was added to the Survival Cooking’s catalog. In other words, no matter who ate it, it was fine as long as Ark checked the cooking’s effect. There was no reason to test out its danger personally!

How anxious he’d been until now every time he made a new meal...

“Cooking has suddenly become enjoyable. After all, food has to be made for the sake of others.”

Ark made food again as he hummed a tune.

However, the Bat was not as loyal as the Skull. The Bat, which had witnessed the horrific scene of the Skull eating the food and falling over, was filled with fear and backed away furtively. Of course, Ark wasn’t one to let it off because of that.

After grabbing the Bat and shoving it into the salad-filled pot, another message window popped up.

The food you have made through Survival Cooking is Suspicious Herb Salad. It appears extremely suspicious, but it actually has the effect of recovering Stamina quickly.

Recovery rate + 50%. Restores up to 150 Health over 30 seconds.

Ark immediately remade and ate food after confirming its effects.

The Shadow Forest’s ratio of poisonous and edible food ingredients were half and half. The problem was that the poisonous ones’ toxicity was extremely powerful. There were a lot of foods that could send Ark off after one bite if he ate them thoughtlessly. However, Ark didn’t worry at all.

He didn’t have to shoulder the danger.

Ark, who'd found a method to figure out the effects of the food safely, had no reservations. He gathered all the ingredients he could see and made food without resting, as if he were possessed by the spirit of a head chef.

"Ohohoho, should I also try putting rotted meat in there this time?"

The Skull and Bat were hugging each other tightly as they trembled from the ever-changing approaching horror.

Ark beamed as he said, "At least it's better than your master, me, dying. Right?"

But they were slaves to their wicked master, and had no place to run. The Skull and Bat were helplessly wandering between life and death. After a few hours, the Skull, which had a loyalty of 200, had a different light to its eyes when it looked at Ark. The Bat that had a low loyalty to begin with even attempted to escape.

"Hmmm, even if you try to flee, you can't hide. Cancel Summon. Resummon, Bat."

The Bat who had fled a significant distance disappeared and appeared in front of Ark's nose.

Ark glared at the squirming Bat as he scolded, "You cheeky rascal, this is your third time."

Ark mercilessly shoved the Bat into the pot.

The firmly stuck and trembling Bat suddenly screamed.

**"UWAHH, PLEASE STOP, MASTER!"**

In the meantime, a message window came up.

As an effect of the mysterious food, the stats of 'Hatred-bearing Bat' have increased.

Hatred-Bearing Bat

Flock

English

Gangly

Agitated

Intelligence

Duck

\* The ability to communicate

with the

Summoner

through

language has

formed

(Note, a food it has eaten once will not have an effect the second time. Only new foods stimulate a Familiar of the Netherworld and bring out its hidden power.)

“Ara, what’s this? A Familiar’s stats can also increase through food?”

Ark’s eyes widened.

He hadn’t even thought that Familiars could grow.

Granted, he could tell from reading the information window that it wasn’t that easy to fulfill the conditions. He had to make and find the right food for the Familiar among hundreds of meals. Plus, he could raise its stats through the same food just one time. If he wanted to raise its stats again, he had to find a new food.

It was a dizzying task that used countless ingredients and an innumerable amount of labor. But even if it was impossible, the fact that a Familiar’s stats could be raised was the difference between heaven and earth.

It was possible. That meant it was worth trying. More so if it weren’t just stats that rose, but new abilities that formed as well.

“But for the first formed ability to be language capability... It wanted to communicate with me that much?”

If monsters were similar to users, then they would also first learn the skill they needed most.

Ark stared at the Bat with surprised eyes. The Bat was flapping as it gnashed its teeth.

“What nonsense, master! Are you spewing such crap because you don’t know why I wanted to speak? Like master, we also feel taste and feel pain! I’d rather die than eat that horrible food!”

“Are you defying your master right now?”

“I-I’m not defying. I’m asserting my right!”

“Do you think that way too, Skull?”

As Ark turned his head a little, the Skull with a loyalty of 200 quickly shook its head.

The Bat leapt up.

“Thi-this traitor!”

“If you keep squealing, I’ll expand your food intake by 2 times.”

“He—heek!

The Bat let loose a stifled cry and shut its mouth.

To be fair, how terrible was eating the food that it even developed a speaking ability? As wicked as Ark was, when he saw this kind of response from the Familiar, he also felt a little sorry.

“Alright, we’ll do it less often in the future.”

“But doesn’t that mean we still have to eat?”

“As your master, why would I be doing it with bad intentions? This is all for your own good. Don’t you also want to grow?”

“Li—lies!”

“I can’t lie,” Ark said confidently.

‘Huhuhu, do you think I’d give up on such a comfortable method? And since I’ve finally found a way to make you guys useful, too.’

Now he had a definite reason to feed the Familiars the unidentified food.

He didn’t need to bat an eyelash because of feelings such as guilt. But was that the end of it? Nope. He had also gained a perfect weapon to control his Familiars.

“Ri-ridiculous! I don’t need it!”

“You’re noisy, if you keep whining I’ll only feed you from now on!”

The Bat jumped in alarm and blocked its mouth.

“Listen well. When there’s battles in the future, whoever doesn’t do its job properly will have to eat the food. You understand?”

“I-I get it,” the Bat replied with a quavering voice.

The Skull also rocked its head back and forth as it clacked its teeth.

Ark had complete domination over the Familiars. Of course, no matter how well they listened to his orders, he had thoughts to keep feeding them food. So no matter what, the result would be the same.

“Bat, go scout the area and come back. Meticulously. You know what’ll happen if you mess up, right?”

Ark had a pleased smile on his face as he watched the Bat flying frantically off.

Dark Walker, an extremely worthwhile profession.

They may be just Familiars, but he couldn't just keep swinging his whip at them all he wanted. Sometimes the Bat and Skull both performed in his expectations, so he exempted them from punishment.

Of course the food was given to the Egg.

'If the Skull and Bat can grow, then it's possible for the Egg, too.'

Ark's prediction hit the mark. After making it absorb a certain amount of food, a change occurred in the Egg.

It wriggled, and small cracks also appeared on its surface. They were minuscule changes that couldn't be detected without careful inspection, but it was definite proof that it could grow with food.

# You're Dead if You're Caught

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“There aren’t that many things worth using.”

“Even so, they are wares difficult to acquire in the area.”

“That may be so, but...”

The shopkeeper scratched his head.

“Alright. Since you’ve steadily made use of our store all this time, I’ll give you up to 5 gold and 40 silver.”

“As I’ve said before, please give me 5 gold and 50 silver.”

“Eh, since you don’t want to lose out on even a single penny. Fine, let’s do that.”

“This is why I like you, mister.”

Ark chuckled as he pocketed the money.

In New World, even if stores were from the same village, they each had a different sale and purchase price. The prices were always inconsistent and depended on the inventory or market price. This was the reason why users looked for stores that would pay them more each time. However, Ark had only used one place while hunting in the Jackson area.

Because of the experiences he had from living in Harun Village for half a month, he knew a bonus was added if he accumulated friendship with the shopkeeper for a long time.

In the beginning, there were times when it was disadvantageous, but at some point you’ll receive 10% more money when you sell goods. When you buy goods, you also receive at least a 10% discount. In addition, if you first buy an item recommended by the shopkeeper,

there were cases where they could give you up to the max 30% discount.

This piece of information was known to only a handful of Merchants and users.

“If you need money, rather than selling worthless wares, why don’t you sell those Cat Gloves instead? I’ll give you a good price for them.”

If he was familiar with the shopkeeper, there were times when the shopkeeper sometimes asked for a particular item. Thanks to these situations, Ark was able to determine the generic value of items even if he didn’t trade with other users.

“No, I’m fine. I’ll come again next time.”

Ark finished what he had to do and left the shop.

“I’ve saved up quite a lot.”

Ark fiddled with his weighted pocket as he walked on the street.

He had approximately 60 gold when he left Harun Village, but before he knew it, he had already saved up 120 gold.

The most costly expenses in New World for users were food supplies and repair costs. On the other hand, it was possible for Ark to save this much because he didn’t spend money for ingredients when he made food, and his repair costs were halved by the Lord’s exclusive Smithy.

However, the time had come to end those privileges.

“So it’s finally time to leave Jackson.”

By hunting in the Shadow Forest, Ark had finally reached level 30. The Rotting Wolves and Zombies were no longer much help in increasing his experience. Although the experience the level 30

Ghoul's gave were still okay, they were low in numbers. Be as it may, he still couldn't hunt the level 50 Reapers. It seemed like he had to move his hunting ground soon and look for a new quest.

"Before that, there's a skill I've got to learn."

It was the repair skill.

There were only five Smithies in Jackson. Near one of those places, there was the sole master NPC who taught the repair skill.

However, he didn't know the exact location.

They didn't go around wearing name tags just because they were master NPCs, so users were forced to personally wander around as they conversed with other NPCs, one by one.

But who was Ark?

'When did I have time to waste like that?'

"Hey, Thomas. It's been awhile."

As Ark waved his hand, Soldiers who'd been passing by rejoiced and approached him.

"Ark, we haven't seen you in for few days. When did you return?"

"A little while ago. But do you happen to know a Blacksmith in the village who'll teach the repair skill?"

"Are you talking about Norton? I know him. Go that way and cross the bridge, it's the first Smithy you see. But what are you going to do by learning the repair method? If you go to the castle, old man Corn fixes them for you cheaply. And even if you learn the repair method, it's not like you can fix them well right away. It's better to leave them to old man Corn."

“I’m thinking of leaving to go on a journey for a few days in a faraway land. Since it’ll be rough if I overlook it, I’m gonna learn it while I’m in the village.”

“Faraway?”

Thomas nodded as he looked at him sadly.

“Well, you are an outsider. Then be sure to at least visit the Lord before you leave. Stop by at our barracks too, okay?”

“Alright.”

Ark waved at the parting Soldiers and turned around.

At the sight, users in the area had perplexed expressions on their faces.

For the most part, Soldiers weren’t that friendly toward a user. They considered the user an existence whose only purpose was to cause trouble in the village. There wasn’t a single user who had heard a Soldier asking them to visit the barracks.

It was only possible for Ark, who was a friend to the young Lord.

In any case, Ark wasn’t interested in the reactions of the users. Even if it was a small number, the only people Ark wanted to befriend were NPCs.

‘Anyway, I’ve learned what I needed. Looks like my pocket will become much lighter.’

A sigh flowed out of Ark’s mouth.

Understandably, it took money to learn a skill from a master NPC. After looking it up on the forums, it costs 20 gold to learn the repair skill. Repairing wasn’t possible with just the skill. Each material exclusive repair skill tool set was 10 gold. In Ark’s case, it would cost

30 gold since he needed the metal kit, leather kit, and cloth kit sets.

In total, he had to spend 50 gold to be able to use the repair skill.

This was the reason why the majority of users couldn't learn it in the beginning even though it was a useful skill.

'Although it's money I saved up...'

His insides soured since he had to use 50 gold of the money he'd scrounged up.

However, if he went on a journey, the repair skill was absolutely necessary for a user with a profession that required them to hunt.

If users had to look for a Smithy every time they needed to repair, it would result to spending more money. If they accidentally forgot to repair, there was danger of breaking their equipment. Something precious will still be precious. It seemed all the more precious because he'd wasted money every day on repair costs, whether it was in Harun or Jackson.

"Come on in. Is there something you need?"

When he arrived at the Smithy, a middle aged man with a long beard approached him.

"I've come here after hearing that the owner of this place is the appointed mentor of the repairing technique."

"Do you want to learn the repairing technique?"

"Yes."

"You've thought well. It's common sense that an adventurer needs the repairing technique. There's nothing more of a dilemma than having your equipment go bad while on a long journey. Let me see your hands."

Norton abruptly grabbed Ark's hands and quietly inspected them.

Shortly afterwards, he shook his head back and forth.

"Alas, though it's regretful, it doesn't look like you can learn the repairing technique."

"I can't learn it?"

"Looks like you don't know much about it. The repairing technique isn't something anyone can learn."

Norton gestured towards men who were swinging hammers in the Smithy. Unlike NPCs, looking at the random clothes they had on, there was no doubt they were users.

In the case the repair skill, it wasn't a skill possible enough to learn with just knowledge. There were also cases where one had to personally try using the skill under the tutelage of an NPC in order to get accustomed to it. It seemed those guys had paid money and were grinding in order to learn the skill.

"Like those those, in order to handle the tools proficiently, you need the right strength and experience. If you swing your hammer without knowing anything, you'll just break your equipment instead. That's why I teach an experienced Knight the technique to handle metal, and experienced Merchant or Alchemist the technique to handle leather and cloth. Even if other people tried learning it, they can't even use it properly."

'Does that mean there's a profession limit on the repair skill?'

His heart plummeted.

Ark's skills had all acquired automatically, or were learned through a quest. Therefore, he'd never considered the possibility of there being a profession limited skill until now.

Although he'd occasionally seen terms with it being an unsuitable skill on the forum, he'd thought that it was just referring to a profession specialty skill.

But for the repair skill, which he considered was absolutely necessary, to have a profession limit...

Ark suddenly thought of the users who had opened stalls within the village.

'Clothes, I will neatly mend your leather armor.'

'I'll make weapons of every kind and metal armor like new.'

They were people putting out signs of that sort and doing business.

Ark had snorted when he saw users receiving repairs from them.

Although the costs were a little less expensive than the Smithy, was there really a need to pay another person money to help them raise their skill? Also, if he saved some money, he'd learn it himself anyways... Those were his thoughts.

But now he understood the situation.

For users incapable of learning the repair skill, they didn't have the freedom of choice. Although he was about to like his Dark Walker profession regret pressed forward again.

'Dammit, I didn't think not being able to choose a combat-related profession was this fatal!'

"Then are you saying that if my equipment breaks in the hunting ground, there's no way for me to fix it?"

"By the looks of it, it seems you're a beginner. Come here," Norton said as he showed Ark the inside of the Smithy.

“If repairing was possible with just words, my Smithy would have been ruined long ago, since rascals who learned the repairing technique from me could open stands and repair cheaply.”

“So it seems.”

“The real revenue of the Smithy is actually this. If you just have this, anyone can repair equipment.”

Norton gestured towards merchandises neatly arranged on one side. It was a case labeled with the words ‘Tool Box’ even beginners could use.

“As long as you have this Tool Box, it’s possible to repair your equipment up to five times, no matter where you are. The General one is used for regular equipment, the Deluxe one for Magic equipment, and the Tool Box of Magic can repair anything above Rare. Of course, you can also repair regular equipment with the Tool Box of Magic, but it wouldn’t make sense to do so. Ah, will you also try using this? They say this oil and whetstone have the effect of raising the performance of weapons and armor for a given period. Isn’t that surprising?”

However, the price of the Tool Box was...

Even considering the point that the Tool Box could be used five times, it was a price 1.5 times more expensive than repairing at a Smithy. On top of that, Ark’s equipment was also the so-called Magic equipment, and his mantle was Rare.

Even if he bought one to keep as a reserve, it would cost him a fortune, 35 gold.

If he had to spend that much money every time he had used up the five repairs, made his consciousness fade.

‘Are you telling me I have to squander the money I saved by hunting like crazy all on repair fees?’

For the first time, he realized New World's outrageous prices.

You couldn't fight without getting hit as you played, so even hunting took money. If you accidentally died and your equipment's durability was completely drained, it would take several times the money. The better the item, the more money it would take.

Ark hadn't known about the hardship users had.

He'd always received a 30 percent discount in Harun Village, and in Jackson, he received repairs for half the price at the Lord's castle. He'd never had to squander a considerable sum on repair fees. For the first time, he could understand the feelings of the people who entrusted repairs to a user in order to save even one penny.

'If they go hunting and can't fish out an item, they'd be hard-pressed to buy even one wheat bread.'

Be as that may, he couldn't just break his equipment because he begrudged the repair fee. With tears in his eyes, Ark pulled out the money as he trembled. However, he couldn't bring himself to pass it over and stopped.

"This can't be. For me to so easily give up the money I saved like that...!"

In reality, there was no part-time job that Ark hadn't done before.

From general store to door-to-door sales, he was also knowledgeable in the business field. If there was one thing he'd learned from doing those jobs, it was that it was stupid to buy merchandise for the asked price.

Bargain, bargain, and bargain again. At the very least, when the shopkeeper said he'd suffered a loss, then you'd know you'd just barely bought it at the proper price.

"Can you perhaps make a discount for me?"

“Don’t say something ridiculous. Because there’s so many rascals repairing for half of our price in this area these days, I’m barely making a living by selling this. Are you telling me to starve and die?”

“But because I’m so poor right now...”

Ark tried putting on the most wretched expression.

It wasn’t even worth trying.

“I can’t consider the individual circumstances of travelers like you. Well maybe. If you were to purchase the merchandise in bulk, I could make a small discount...”

“In bulk? How many are you talking about?”

“I wonder? If you buy about 100 of them, I’ll give you up to a 5 percent discount off the price. Sometimes there are merchants or travelers who save up money and buy like that. If you’re short on money, why don’t you try that as well.”

Ark’s eyes flashed. It was because the keen sense beaten into him by a destitute life had caught the scent of money.

“I see. I understand. I will come again.”

Ark quickly left the Smithy.

Of course, he had no thoughts of gathering users. He didn’t have the confidence to gather scores of users, and even if he managed to gather the users and receive the discount, with 5 percent on 30 gold, it’d only amount to just 1 gold and 50 silver. The discount was too small compared to the effort he’d put in. But for Ark, no, just for Ark, there was another method that he could use.

‘It’s possible. It has to be possible. I’m sure there wasn’t something like a Tool Box in the Lord’s exclusive Smithy. That means in the end, they probably buy the Tool Box from another place. Then there’s no

rule that says I can't be the intermediary dealer.”

Ark shortly sought out the young Lord.

Then, with his most helpless and miserable expression, he cried out.  
“My Lord!”

“Why are you like this? I heard that you were going to leave to another area, but why do you have that sort of expression?”

“I was going to leave. However, a small problem came up. I couldn't cope with what I should do, so I sought the Lord out in order to at least consult with you.”

“A problem? If it's something I can help with, tell me.”

‘Huhuhu, I've got him.’

Ark had a satisfied smile as he chattered rapidly.

“Actually, I was going to go on a faraway journey with people I know this time. Buying the necessary goods was entrusted to me. But I accidentally went and ordered too much of the wrong item. Later on, I tried to cancel the order because I knew I'd made a mistake, but the shopkeeper had already gone and made the order so I had to carry the responsibility. The teammates who heard the news all said it was my fault and just ran off... waah!”

“They betrayed their teammate and ran away just because of that? Aren't they men who don't even know of loyalty!”

As expected, the perfectly rigid young Lord was infuriated, like it was his own problem.

“You can't blame them. It was all my fault.”

“It's because you are too kind. In the first place, for you to do such a chore... no, it's fine. It's useless to say something like that now. So

tell me. What exactly did you order on accident?"

"It's the Portable Tool Box."

At Ark's reply, the young Lord soon put on a smooth smile.

"Aah, what a relief. If it's an item like that, I think I will be able to help."

"Huh? From the Lord?"

"That's right. There's a Smithy in the castle, but it can't make the Portable Tool Box. That's why every time an expedition goes out, it's an item we purchase separately. What good timing. Our stock has been falling, so I shall purchase them all. No, I may as well procure 100 each of the General and Deluxe. That way, your face will also stand out to the shopkeeper. The bill is of no consequence."

"If you do that, I would feel too sorry..."

"Think not of it. Didn't I say this? That I would help you anytime if you needed it."

"Thank you so much!"

The young Lord immediately pulled out a check worth 2500 gold.

A new stat he hadn't even imagined formed along with cheerful music.

A new stat has been formed.

The Art of Communication (+5): You are able to achieve what you want with an ornate way of speech. The higher the skill, the easier you can persuade your target, and you can drag out an even greater benefit.

Stat distribution is impossible, and will only increase when you have succeeded in a negotiation, a bargain, or a special deal.

Ark, who received the check, was smiling from ear to ear.

He'd thought it might be possible, but he hadn't even imagined that the problem would work itself out.

The discount he would receive at the Smithy was 5 percent. Simply buying the wares with 2500 gold and delivering them would yield 125 gold. It was like finding a pot of gold on a clear day.

However, being satisfied with the gains in front of your eyes was something beginners do. The greater a profit you earn, the more profit you need to rake in.

Ark found Norton and extended the check.

"General and Deluxe, 100 of each. How long will it take?"

"100 each? And the delivery is to the Lord's castle?"

"Yes. But if it's this much, don't you think you should give me a 10 percent cut?"

Ark slowly began to make the arrangements for bargaining.

"10 percent, you say! What nonsense! Then I'll acquire a loss when I sell it. However, if you're on familiar terms with the Lord, in consideration of the next deal, I can make up to a special 6 percent cut for you."

"Alright. 8 percent! If you sell 200 of them in one transaction, won't a fair amount be left?"

Ark suggested as he waved the check in front of Norton's eyes. Norton, whose eyes moved to follow the check, finally blew out a sigh.

"Alright. I'll give you a discount of 7 percent. In exchange, I have two requests."

“What are they?”

“One is that you have to take the discounted amount in merchandise rather than money, since the bill you’re paying with is a check. Of course you have to give in that much.”

“I understand. And the other one?”

“Actually... the materials for making the Tool Box have decreased, so I can’t deliver 200 of them right away. A special material to produce the Tool Box. I roughly have enough of the other materials, but I’m short on the material called Ailard. I’ll do it if you go acquire some of that.”

“Where do I need to go to get it?”

“Ailard is an item that only a capable Alchemist can make. The Alchemist who does business with us is Raymond. But because his health has fallen these days, so he told me he couldn’t go out and acquire the materials he needs for making the Ailard. He sent in a request to introduce him to a useful adventurer. So go find him first. He’ll know if you tell him that I sent you.”

“I understand. But if I have to go acquire the material of the item I’m buying myself...”

“What a vicious fellow you are. I lost, I’ve lost. I’ll give you 8 percent.”

“Thank you very much. And I’m just saying this in case, but to the Lord...”

“I’m a shopkeeper too. Don’t worry about that.”

Ark, who received Norton’s assurance, went looking for Raymond. Just as he’d heard, Raymond greeted Ark with a haggard and pale face.

"You said Norton sent you? Although he acted like he hadn't heard until now... well, it's about time that the Ailard has dwindled."

After explaining his personal musings, Raymond nodded.

"The material you need to find is a mineral that looks like a red mushroom. It can only be acquired in a cave located deep within the Gran Swamp. You'll probably have to go all the way to the end. But keep one thing in mind. That is an extremely precious mineral. You must keep all information concerning the mineral a secret from other people. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

\*Thu-thu-thump\*

A quest information window came pouring in like the flow of a tide.

#### Alchemist Raymond's Request

Alchemist Raymond of Jackson is producing Ailard for the Smithy. However, he cannot acquire the necessary material because he has fallen ill, so he has requested for you do the job.

Raymond has urged you multiple times to not disclose any information regarding the mineral to anyone.

As per Raymond's request, you must guard the secret until the completion of the quest. You cannot be in a party.

Difficulty: F

'So a quest can show up like this, too!'

Who would've known that his plan to get the Tool Box for free would have been connected to a quest!

'Is it a quest that's only given to a person who orders several hundred of the Tool Box by himself? Then there probably aren't many people who have done this quest in the early stage.'

Catching the mice after getting behind was no different.

If it was difficulty F, it seemed it'd be possible to manage it himself.

Ark agreed to the quest without hesitation. If just this quest was taken care of, he could cut 8 percent off the Tool Box price. The money alone that would fall into his hands was a whopping 200 gold! Since he'd get 10 Tool Boxes of Magic for free, there was no reason to decline.

Ark received a mark on his map and received a recovery potion and wheat bread, as well as 2 Deluxe Tool Boxes through his eloquent way of speaking, as advance payment. After packing them, he headed towards the Cave of the Gran Swamp.

\* \* \*

“Bat, go survey the inside of the cave and come back.”

“I got it, Master.”

At Ark's words, the Bat flapped as it flew into the cave.

When he passed through the Gran Swamp, Ark was level 32.

The Gran Swamp was a day away from Jackson and was a place inhabited by all kinds of swamp monsters. Even so, it wasn't difficult because he'd raised his level quite a lot in the Shadow Forest, but the Slime was still a fatiguing opponent. Its body was made of acidic phlegm, so every time he fought it, his equipment durability dropped bit by bit. If he hadn't come with the Tool Box packed, he would have had to go in and out of the village countless times.

‘Dammit, though one Tool Box is that expensive...’

If a battle broke out with a Slime, he worried more about the repair fee than his Health.

‘Anyways, it looks like I wasn't the first to discover this dungeon,’ Ark muttered regretfully.

An explanation about the cave had popped up, but a bonus didn't

come in.

Even a dungeon was cleared out once, monsters and item were likely to spawn again when time passed. But if you were unlucky, you might not be able to fish out anything. However, Ark didn't worry that much about it, since his most important goal was to finish the quest anyways.

‘Since it’s a job worth 200 gold, I can’t be too cheap.’

Just then, the Bat came out of the cave.

“Master. There’s 1 person.”

“A person? You mean a stranger?”

“Yeah. He’s coming out this way.”

Wariness settled in Ark’s eyes.

You had to be more wary of a user than a monster. The saying that mankind’s natural enemy was himself didn’t just apply in reality. It was more so particularly in a remote place like this. In a place where there was no one to help, if he got caught in a high level’s PK ambush, he’d suffer without a squirm and that would be that.

Ark waited with a tense face and soon someone walked out of the cave.

As Ark confirmed the face of the other person, his eyes widened.

“... You—you are?”

The other person also recoiled as he took one step backwards.

The Warrior wearing plate armor was Andel.

The name he’d screamed countless times as he ground his teeth!

Andel must have recognized Ark because he stepped back as he

wincing. Then, as if he was thinking of something, his eyes rolled back and forth. He was deliberating on how he should respond. After a long time, Andel must have decided because he furtively raised the corners of his mouth and began speaking.

“Ah, I thought you were someone I’ve seen somewhere. You’re the person I partied with before. Did you say your name is Ark?”

Ark silently nodded his head.

He wouldn’t be satisfied even if he could immediately beat the shit out of this bastard. Well, how long had he actually waited to do just that?

However, Ark suppressed his anger and endured it for now.

He hadn’t checked how strong the guy had become yet. If he thoughtlessly followed his emotions, he could be the one to suffer instead. He also wanted to see how Andel would approach him.

“You were Andel, right?”

“So you do remember.”

‘Would you be able to forget if it were you?’

Ark barely managed to swallow back the curses that surged up.

“That’s good—I wanted to meet you once again.”

“Me...?”

“Yes, because it looks like I’ve made a big mistake. Who would’ve known your stats would decrease every time you die? After hearing about it, I went to Harun Village because I wanted to apologize. But you weren’t there. I worried that you might’ve given up on the game, but since you’re all the way here, looks like you’ve raised your level quite a lot?”

‘You didn’t know? Apologize? You will soon, you damn bastard!’

In the end, what Andel was curious about was Ark's level. It wasn't possible to tell how his attitude would transform if he decided Ark's level was lower than his own. Ark answered vaguely.

"Well, just leave it at that. To be sure, I was extremely upset at that time. I even thought about whether I should really quit the game. But there's a circumstance that makes it so I can't quit, so I'm doing whatever I can."

"You haven't been misunderstanding it, right?"

"Huh? Misunderstanding what?" Ark feigned innocence as if he didn't know what Andel was talking about.

Andel scanned Ark up and down with a somewhat relief expression.

With the Black Bear Mouse's Leather Armor, Cat Paws, and the frayed helmet and shoes he'd picked up in the Shadow Forest, no matter what his ability was, as far as outside appearances went, he looked no different than a beggar.

The only thing worth considering was the Blood-red Mantle flapping behind his back!

Due to the enormous penalty from the Mantle, he couldn't wear it while hunting, but he'd equipped it just in case after hearing the Bat's words that a user was coming out.

Nevertheless, he wasn't at that great a level. The Andel's eyes, who'd made that judgement, glinted slyly.

"Ark-nim, if you have time, would you perhaps like to enter the dungeon with me?"

"The dungeon?"

"I discovered this dungeon as I was passing by, but it's a little difficult alone, so I was going to come later with a person I know, but

since Ark-nim is here, I think it'll work even if we go in. How about it?"

"I wonder."

As Ark purposely pretended like he couldn't decide, Andel spoke up quickly.

"If an okay item comes out in the dungeon, I'll give it to Ark-nim."

"If you do that, I'll be sorry."

"No, let's do it like that since there's the happening from last time. Yes?"

"Well, if you put it that way, then..."

Ark nodded. He couldn't know what Andel was secretly plotting, but Ark didn't want to let the bastard go. Even if he couldn't win by any chance, if he couldn't at least cut a knife scar in Andel's side after seeing the opportunity, it was obvious he wouldn't even be able to sleep.

For that, it'd be difficult if he made a party with him. There was the quest condition as well...

"Going in together is good, but to be honest I don't want to make a party."

"It doesn't matter."

Andel accepted readily.

When Ark finished his negotiation, he took a step and entered the cave, and a read suddenly enveloped his body. Just as Ark raised his head with an alarmed expression, Andel scratched his head with a sheepish expression.

“Ah, were you surprised? It’s just that I was only checking your status window. Since we haven’t formed a party, I can only assist properly after finding out Ark-nim’s status in advance.”

‘Does this little shit really think I’m a pushover?’

Sparks flew from Ark’s eyes.

It was common sense to use the [Detect] function, which allows to check another user’s status window, after receiving permission beforehand. If they used the command without permission, one couldn’t help but think that there was an ulterior motive. No, it was nothing new, but what definitely showed up were just Health and the main stats.

The Blood-red Mantle of Dreams was an item that decreased all stats by -15.

Andel must have thought that Ark’s stats were low considering he was a level 32. In addition, there was no doubt Andel had judged that even his abilities and skills were also just as low. It didn’t feel good to appear weak, but if it was a wary opponent, it was better to let them underestimate.

As expected, Andel showed a relieved expression.

“It looks like you weren’t able to restore all the stats you lost in the beginning.”

“I just leveled up without knowing. Although I’ve already changed my profession, I’m in this state.”

“What did you do as your job-change?”

“It is Thief-related.”

“Ah, so that’s why your Agility and Luck are high. Since I changed my profession to a Warrior, I will take the lead.”

Andel pulled out a longsword and raised his shield, and gallantly moved to the front. Showing his back like it was nothing was a sign of his confidence that he could win even if he was ambushed.

It was proof he had completely lowered his guard concerning Ark.

‘Hmph, just wait and see. You’ll come to regret your judgement.’

Just when Ark was having thoughts like that:

“Master, I don’t like that human.”

He heard a displeased voice from his shoulder. It was the Bat. Ark had put the Bat on his shoulder, and left the Skull hanging on his side. Since Andel didn’t ask, it seemed he thought they were ornaments.

In any case, Ark felt affection towards the Bat for the first time.

An ally he could believe no matter the situation— meeting Andel again made him realize anew how precious its existence was.

Ark exclaimed to the Andel who was showing off his equipment, “Wow, looks like you’ve raised yourself a lot in the meantime.”

“It’s nothing special. I’m only level 35 now, jeez.”

Andel sprang into the cave with an arrogant expression.

There were enormous numbers of monsters gathered within the cave. The Lizardmen or Goblins he’d seen in the Gran Swamp charged at them in swarms. If it were Ark, he would have fought by hiding his body and luring one or two each time, but Andel set his shield in front and rushed in without care.

Andel, who defeated two of them in an instant, immediately drank a restoration potion and defeated the rest of them as well.

‘Hmm, you say that’s level 35?’

“Eyes of the Cat!”

Ark activated the skill towards Andel while pretending to use it on a monster. As he expected, the level of Andel, who’d job-changed to Fighter, was a staggering 43.

On top of that, his defense was enormous because he was equipped with a plated armor and a shield. In actuality, even when he fought three or four monsters, his Health didn’t decrease by much.

What was more surprising was that Andel’s name was marked in red.

Chaotic character— in other words, it meant he had a history of having PKed.

Though well, if it was Andel, it wasn’t something that surprising.

‘It was good that I didn’t thoughtlessly attack him after all.’

However, it was too early to relax. Andel’s ploy was too obvious.

It was a ploy to use Ark in a dungeon that was difficult to penetrate alone. Saying he would give the decent items to Ark if one ever dropped, was the same as meaning of him saying he would kill him if a decent item showed up.

‘Even so, I can’t withdraw here. So I have carefully look at the way he is fighting. The only way I can win against an opponent with an over 10 level difference is by planning a good strategy.’

Ark meticulously inspected Andel’s movements while fighting halfheartedly.

Once he saw Ark panting with one monster as an opponent, Andel became even more triumphant and sprang forward wildly.

It was the typical Warrior's fighting method of pushing forward with Strength, Stamina, and defense. That was the reason why he couldn't break through this level of dungeon even though he was a level 43.

Instead of setting a strategy and handling them one by one like Ark, he set his attack power and defense in front and charged in extravagantly.

"That way might be the answer if it was another game, but this is New World. You still don't really know New World's combat. That is my key point of winning.'

Ark followed Andel's back as he unremittingly set up a strategy inside his mind. In the first place, since it was a dungeon he'd come to through an F difficulty quest, the level wasn't that high.

As the level 43 Andel received Ark's assistance, the aggravated monsters were soon cleared. And when nearly 2 hours had passed, the two defeated at least a hundred odd monsters and arrived at the last part of the cave.

"I see the end now. It's thanks to Ark-nim."

"Oh no, there's not much I've done, jeez."

"But compared to the difficulty, a worthwhile item hasn't come out. Although I have to give it to Ark-nim..."

"Please do not worry about it. And it's not like we've reached the end yet, either."

"That's true. Then let's hurry and finish it."

It was when Andel, who'd finished restoring, stood up.

\*Kuuoooooooo!\*

Suddenly, with a roar that shook the cave, a warning message popped up.

The boss monster Crystal Golem has appeared!

An enormous hand reached out all of a sudden from behind the corner.

It was a hand that looked like boulder chunks had been clumped together.

As if led by that hand, a monster with a gargantuan body rounded the corner. It was a Golem made of gathered boulders that gave off a bluish light. The Golem rolled its red eyes, and after scanning Ark and Andel, it loosed a shout with a harsh voice.

“FOOD!”

“Be careful!” Andel yelled as he drew up his shield.

With a loud bang, Andel was pushed back. Ark quickly went behind the golem’s back and stabbed with his sword.

The Golem however only shrugged it’s shoulder. It did not seem to have received a significant amount of damage.

When Andel called the status check command, a health bar appeared above the Golem’s head. The Heath that Ark’s attack had decreased was just 1 percent.

“Ark-nim, please give me support!”

“If it’s Andel-nim, you can surpass your wound and defeat the Golem!”

Ark unfurled the Nursing skill as he nodded his head.

Andel’s sword, who received vigor and courage, and even a minor blessing, struck the Golem as it sliced through the air. With a massive cry, the Golem took a few steps back. At one blow of the Warrior with up to 200 Strength, they could see the Golem’s Health drop

significantly.

“I’ll block from the front, so please guard my back!”

“Yes!”

Ark and Andel’s series of attacks unfurled. Andel struck the Golem squarely as he set his shield in front, and as the high Agility Ark sought critical hits from behind the Golem, consecutive attacks unfurled.

Andel was definitely strong. Due to having his whole body plastered in plate armor, his defense was also considerable, and he must’ve had ample funding because if his Health wore down even slightly, he downed a recovery potion. That was a luxury that Ark, who trembled at even 1 copper, couldn’t even imagine.

However, the battle was not concluded easily. The Golem was strong to the point of not matching the dungeon’s difficulty, so strong that Ark couldn’t have possibly faced it if he were alone.

But with the two’s concentrated attacks, the Golem’s Health also steadily neared the bottom.

At the sight of the Golem wavering, Andel loosed the Warrior-type kill that he’d been saving.

“Charge, crush of Strength—Warrior’s Blow!”

Ba-ba-baaang, the Golem took a big step back as its body cracked again and again at the blow.

When Ark’s attack struck as a critical hit from behind, the Golem finally couldn’t withstand it anymore and collapsed.

Andel and Ark’s levels simultaneously went up by 1 each.

Once the Golem collapsed, a single helmet and a mineral in the shape

of a red mushroom were dropped as a brilliant burst of light shimmered out.

“We won!”

Just then, Andel hurriedly took out and drank a recovery potion.

He did so even though there wasn’t even one monster around them. No matter how paralyzed he was about money sense, there was no need to handle something he could’ve done with one wheat bread without even a reason.

Just as expected, Andel suddenly swung his sword toward Ark, who’d approached to check the items. But the Ark who’d been expecting his attack quickly stepped back and glared with a sharp gaze.

“So now you reveal your true colors.”

“Mwahaha, then did you really think I’d simply hand over boss-drop items?”

“No, I didn’t believe you.”

“Then there’s really nothing to resent me for.”

“I’ll just ask one thing. Even when I was dying in Harun Village, you knew that the stats were decreasing, right?”

“Of course. Wasn’t the guy who was tricked without knowing an idiot?”

“Son of a bitch.”

“Say what you want, because this time, I’ll make you want to give up the game.”

Andel’s eyes gleamed with bloodthirst as he charged towards Ark.

Ark blocked the sword with all his might. Ark's sword was helplessly pushed back because the strength difference was too great.

However, Andel's continuous attacks were all the same. Because unlike Ark, who'd got by studying countless fighting methods in difficult situations, Andel was the type who raised his fighting ability merely through level ups.

If they were the same level, he probably wouldn't have even be a match for Ark. But in the game, there was a way to overcome a difference of 11 levels with just ability. In some way or another, the reason this situation was unfolding like a battle was because Ark received an ability bonus of 20 percent in the dark.

Andel had an expression which seems to be saying he couldn't understand the situation.

“You persistent bastard, let's see how long you can last!”

Finally, after receiving hits on several occasions, Ark's Health had been slashed by 50%, whereas Andel's Health had only decreased by 20% due to his plated armor.

Seeing Ark had been overcome, Andel sneered.

“Did you think I didn't know anything? When we first walked into the cave, you used a Thief skill ‘Detect’ on me, right? You stupid bastard, you obediently followed me in even after checking my level. At that time, it was already predetermined you would die. Charge of Strength, Warrior's Blow!”

Andel used the skill with a triumphant voice.

As the skill registered in rapid succession, in one blow Ark entered the critical state as his Health neared zero.

‘Now is the time!’

Ark's eyes flashed.

It was just as Andel said. When he'd checked the bastard's level, Ark had agonized over whether he should run or not. But he didn't run.

The first reason was his hatred toward Andel, the second was he had been sure there was a method to take Andel down. And that a method that could only be used now, while in a critical state.

"Eyes of the Cat!"

As Ark's eyes colored with golden light, red points marking Andel's weak points appeared all over his body.

Sure enough, perhaps because he was a Warrior who invested while believing only in his level and defense, his entire body was riddled with weak points. As an effect of the skill, his Health also appeared. Andel's consumed Health up until now was just 35 percent.

But now was the start!

"Dark Blade!"

Ark's sword moved fluidly in the dark and lodged itself in Andel's nape.

A critical hit ignoring all defenses has been delivered!

Bewildered, Andel took a step back. Ark succeeded in another Dark Blade attack in an instant as he took one step forward. In the blink of an eye, Andel's Health plummeted by 50 percent.

Ark's learned skill was a result made of 5 simultaneously overlapping buffs.

The very first one that applied was the 20 percent ability increase within the dark. The next ones were raising the attack power and critical hit rate by detecting the weak spots with Eyes of the Cat, and

the Indomitable Will and Indomitable Body that were invoked in the critical state swiftly increased the numbers once more.

The final touch was a Dark Walker's profession skill, Dark Blade!

It was a skill which ignored defense and raised attack power of critical hits by 150 percent. Although he didn't defeat the 15 level higher Andel in one fatal hit, with the combined increase from the linked effects, with two attacks he slashed Andel's Health down by 50 percent.

The reason why he'd endured without using his Mana until he'd fallen into the critical state was solely for this moment.

It was an act of burning one's bridges that only Ark, who had grown from only fierce battles, could use!

Andel's face blanched.

“Gasp, ho-how can this be!”

Andel urgently used the [Detect] command.

Then, as he soon checked Ark's remaining Mana, he heaved a sigh of relief. Due to having used Eyes of the Cat and Dark Blade twice, he didn't have any Mana left. Whereas Ark's Health had 5 percent left now, Andel still had 15 percent left.

“Hng, looks like your last-ditch effort ends here. Since you don't have much Mana left, you can't use your skills, either.”

“Do you really think so?”

A cold smile touched Ark's lips.

“Blood-red Mantle of Dreams!”

Ark was enveloped as the scarlet mantle suddenly flared out.

Simultaneously, Ark's Health had recovered 100 percent. With his Health suddenly restored, Andel had a flummoxed expression. But the truly surprising thing was from then onwards. After that, Andel's swung sword attacks all deflected off the mantle.

The ability of the Blood-red Mantle of Dreams to nullify all attacks for 10 seconds! There wasn't much meaning in monster hunting, but if the opponent was a user, it demonstrated absolute power.

Andel's eyes flared with astonishment

"N-no way... are you saying that mantle was a Rare item?"

It was true. Ark hadn't just equipped the mantle to hide his stats. And in order to use the mantle's ability, which could only be used at night, Ark had purposefully drawn out the time.

Andel, who realized for the first time that something had gone wrong, hurriedly pulled out a recovery potion.

Ark's eyes froze with urgency.

'He can't. The mantle's effect is already over. If the bastard drinks the potion, I can't predict the outcome.'

"Summon Demon, Bat! No matter what you have to do, block that bastard! If you don't, I'll make you eat food without rest for ten days!"

"Eeeek! No way!"

As the Bat was summoned, it flew rapidly at Andel.

And then, it hurled and shoved itself into the mouth of Andel, who'd been trying to drink the recovery potion.

"You did well. Bat!"

Ark unfurled his Sword-Hand Combat and toppled Andel. Then he stepped on both of Andel's hands and raised his sword.

After smiling coldly, Ark thrust his sword down without hesitation.

“Kuhuk, y-you little shit... Just wait and see!”

After those words, Andel sagged weakly. He died and was forced to log out.

You have defeated a level 44 Chaotic player.

Fame + 30.

Ark released the breath he'd been holding in one burst.

He'd finally gotten his revenge. And it'd been against an opponent 11 levels higher!

When the battle tension settled down, an electrifying pleasure swept down his body. The Ark who'd been briefly savoring the pleasure turned around.

It was for the right given only to the victor, picking up the loot.

Many penalties were added to Chaotic users.

One of those was that they lost their equipment at death. When a normal user died, they dropped an equipment item at a fixed probability, but each time a Chaotic user died, they dropped one equipment item no matter what. Steel Greaves at the place where Andel had died.

“Information window!”

Steel Greaves

~~Steel Footwear~~

~~Defense~~

~~Weight Resist Strength~~

Steel Greaves  
made from  
smelting good  
quality steel.  
Although  
movement is  
slowed, you can  
expect excellent  
defense that  
cannot be  
compared to a  
leather product.

Agility -5, the penalty is nulled if used by a Warrior-related profession.

Ark, who'd stored the Steel Greaves, also checked the Crystal Golem drops.

Crystal Golem's Head (Magic)

~~Strong~~ Teleport

~~Defend~~ Ability

~~Magical Resist~~ Strength

A Golem's head  
imbued with the  
strength of  
magical crystal.  
The material  
quality is strong  
enough to block  
an iron mace,  
and it can clear  
your mind with  
the magical  
strength.

Option: Mana + 100

Crystal: The Mana-filled mineral that the Crystal Golem had been

growing in its body.

It was when Ark had picked up the Crystal. Light spewed from his hand all of a sudden and a new information window opened.

Through your Knowledge of Ancient Relics, you have discovered hidden information of the Crystal.

The Crystal is a blood crystal, one of the Ancient Relics.

As a blood crystal, an ancient organic mineral that gives the power of healing, it will naturally develop if fragments are buried within a manufactured Golem's body and furnished with nourishment. Because Mana-rich humans were used as nourishment for the Golem, production was banned long ago.

Bonus for acquiring information of the ancient relic crystal.

Knowledge of Ancient Relics + 5.

Intelligence + 5.

Fame has increased by 30.

The quest has been updated.

Alchemist Raymond's Request = The Secret of the Blood Crystal

The mineral that Raymond asked you to get was one of the ancient relics, a blood crystal. It seems that Raymond purposefully planted and raised the blood crystal within the crystal golem's body and was supporting it with sacrificial travelers. In order to prevent more sacrifices, you must interrogate Raymond, obtain a confession, and inform a guard of Jackson.

Difficulty: G

After briefly looking at the blood crystal, Ark turned his gaze.

Andel's body hadn't disappeared yet. When a user died from PvP, there was a penalty of their body not disappearing for 24 hours and they couldn't log in as well.

It blocked revenge ploys that had been problematic in online games on several occasions and was considerate of giving the victor time to enjoy their win.

However, this kind of penalty had more meaning to Ark.

“Wait and see? Hah, how funny. You picked the wrong guy to mess with.”

\* \* \*

Ark immediately returned to Jackson Castle.

While he was waiting at the right time near the Quartermaster, Andel appeared with white light.

As expected, he'd set his resurrection place to Jackson, which was close to the dungeon. It was well worth seeing him standing there robbed of his shoes, barefooted in his plate armor.

Andel, who noticed Ark, flinched in surprised and his body began to tremble.

“Y-you, you bastard.....!”

“Why are you so surprised? Didn't you say wait and see?”

Ark sprang up and rushed at Andel.

Even though users were starting a fight right in front of the village, the Soldiers turned a blind eye.

That was yet another penalty that Chaotic users received.

Normally, if users fought amongst themselves near the village, they'd be attacked by a Soldier. However, there were exceptions.

One was if a normal user were to attack a Chaotic user first. A fight like this was far more advantageous for the normal user. When the normal user was pushed back, all they had to do was flee to the village. But the Chaotic user couldn't enter the village or chase them in either, and on the flip side, they had no where to run.

That was the reason why users feared becoming Chaotic.

Ark beat up Andel without mercy.

Similar to their previous battle, he landed critical hits continuously in the critical state and became invincible through the mantle's power when he was in a pinch.

The stat penalty was doubled if you were killed by a user. Therefore, it meant all of Andel's stats had been cut by 2. Andel, who also had lowered defense because he even lost the Steel Greaves, crumbled feebly.

He was a user who wasn't like Ark who had real skills, but had gotten by through the strength of his stats and items.

"You mongrel, you're dead..."

Andel babbled nonsense as he dropped more of his armor.

Ark snickered as he stored the item. Then, after hunting while roaming around the area, he camped at the resurrection site and waited when exactly 24 hours had passed. It seems Andel didn't even considered Ark might be waiting for him there again. It was truly a delusion.

'Don't make me laugh, how long do you think I've waited for this day!'

When he fought Andel, who didn't even have shoes, armor, and had -4 stats, soon he didn't even need the mantle's ability. As soon as Eyes of the Cat and Dark Blade went into a continuous combo, Andel collapsed listlessly. The bastard must've realized the severity of the situation at last because next time, he didn't log in even though 24 hours had passed.

'Hah, you're saying we should see whose patience is greater, right? If the bastard is an applicant, he probably won't be able to endure not logging in for a few days.'

For the first time in his life, Ark went as far as to submit a week-long vacation from work.

‘If you mess with me, I’ll definitely repay you.’

“Please, let’s talk a little. I will apologize. Please?” Andel, who’d logged in within 30 hours, spoke submissively.

After ignoring Andel’s plea and beating him, he dropped gloves. After killing him two more times like that, Andel became completely naked.

Although Andel tried begging in the end, Ark didn’t say a single word and silently raised his sword. Then, after he immediately started fighting when Andel logged in, making it impossible for Andel to replace his equipment and finish logging in, he rained regular attacks on him and razed him to the ground.

Ark killed him six times during his vacation and killed him a total of eight times. Of course, Andel lost his plated armor set and even his sword. Then, from the seventh time onwards, there weren’t any equipped items to drop, so he began dropping japttem inside his bag.

Andel lost 96 stats and became truly penniless, whereas besides the time when he was waiting, Ark focused on hunting and raised his level by 2 instead. It couldn’t even be called a fight anymore, but it got closer to a one-sided slaughter.

Finally, as if Andel had completely lost motivation, he logged in after a whole two days had passed.

Now Andel was forced to choose between recovering 96 stats by catching mice or quitting the game. And no matter what he chose, it was certain that it would make it extremely difficult for him to pass the exam.

“Alright, it’s not enough yet, but this time I’ll let you off here.”

Only then did Ark get up from the resurrection site as if he were

being generous.

Ark then turned towards Andel who was slumped with a cowed and despairing face, he growled,

“If I catch sight of you next time, it won’t end like this. I’m stopping here this time, but if I see you in another place, I’ll kill you until your stats become 1.”

Andel’s face went white with terror.

# The Two Girls

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With a flurry of dim lights, a new user was born into New World. Her name was Roco. She was a cute looking female character.

“Woah, woah, so this is what they call a virtual reality game?”

Roco looked at her surroundings with round, fascinated eyes. The sky, earth, mountains, fields, everything about the landscape before her was just as, no several times more beautiful than reality.

Buildings made of stone and wood encircled her. It was just like the sight of Medieval Europe you could sightsee at a theme park.

Roco carefully raised her foot with an uneasy look on her face, and took a step. Immediately afterwards, whirling her arms and suddenly exclaiming.

“Am I really inside a unit? Even though moving about isn’t different from reality? No wonder the game fee is expensive. Ah? Is this my face?”

Roco was running around left and right like a child when her eyes caught her reflection in a glass window. She stared at her stunning appearance, which looked like the X idols she’d often seen on TV.

She unconsciously let out a laugh.

“Eheheh, alright. My plastic surgery looks like it’s been done perfectly, so should I get started on this thing called New World?”

Although she said so in high spirits, Roco scratched her head in confusion.

“But, what am I supposed to do first?”

Just then, an elder who had been glancing at Roco from behind spoke to her.

“Youngin, is this your first time here?”

“Huh? Me?”

Since he spoke suddenly, Roco was startled and stepped back. The elder chuckled as he nodded his head.

“Yes, that’s right. I’m talking to you. What’s your name?”

“I’m called Roco.”

“Little Roco, do you perhaps need some help?”

“Yes, um... for now, please let me ask you a few questions. This is Harun Village, right?”

“Indeed, this is Schudenberg Kingdom’s frontier village, Harun. I am the village chief, Hansen.”

“Ah, grandpa Hansen!”

Roco excitedly jumped up and down as she clapped her hands. Then, as if she was checking him out, she circled around Hansen, looking him over. Hansen stammered with an embarrassed expression.

“Why, why are you acting like this?”

“Ah, I apologize. I was just amazed to personally see grandpa Hansen, who I’ve only heard about.”

“You’ve heard of me from someone?”

“Yes, Hyun Woo-oppa.... ah, no. I heard it from Ark-oppa.”

“Ark! Are you an acquaintance of Ark?”

“Yes, yes. Does grandpa also remember Ark-oppa? I heard he’d come

here.”

“Of course I remember! How could I forget Ark? He was a great young man with proper manners and is considerate of others, which is a trait uncommonly seen in people these days.

“Right? Right?”

“Also, his bravery is like none other. There was a time when he saved us from a crisis everyone had neglected. The event is still fresh in my memory. Ah, but what relationship do you have with Ark?”

At Hansen’s question, Roco blushed and giggled.

“Excuse me, where do I have to go to meet Ark oppa?”

“I wonder? Last time I saw him, I heard he was going to Jackson Castle. However, quite a bit of time has passed since then so I’m not sure if he is still there. Why are you looking for him?”

“It’s been a really long time since I’ve seen him. Last week, he suddenly took a leave of absence from the mart and hasn’t returned... I thought I might be able to meet him if I came here. I also wanted to try this once, while I had the chance.”

“Mart?”

Hansen tilted his head as if it was a term he had never heard of before.

Roco quickly shook her head.

“Nothing. You do not need to know. Anyway, how can I get to Jackson Castle?”

“Surely you’re not going to go right now?”

“Why not? I can’t go right now?”

“Ho ho ho, look here, little Roco. Jackson Castle is a place very far away. You’ll have to walk non-stop for days before reaching it. In addition, the road is incomparably rough, and there are countless dangers lurking about. A beginner adventurer like you would become a wolf’s meal before you could even take a few steps away from the village. Since you’re an acquaintance of Ark, I’ll advise you with good intentions. If you want to go to Jackson Castle, you’ve got to gain enough experience first.”

“How do you gain experience?”

“If you want, I can introduce to you a suitable job.”

‘Ah, this must be what you call a quest!’

“Yes, then I’ll work.”

As Roco recalled the stories she heard from here and there, and nodded her head.

But after she listened to Hansen’s words, she immediately lost her nerve.

The quest Hansen gave her was none other than defeating what she feared most, mice. Roco, who had agonized over it briefly, set her lips in a firm line and courageously casted her fears away.

‘Che, am I an idiot? What am I afraid of? No matter how realistic it may seem to be, this is still inside a game. Even if they were called mice, it will probably look more like Mickey-mouse or Pikachu. It’s a little discomfiting having to crush things as cute as them, but there’s no helping it. Since this is a game.’

“Yes, I’ll be heading out now.”

Roco bowed as she smiled cutely and left for the tavern.

Roco went to the tavern and chatted with Kraydon about Ark before

entering the warehouse. In an instant, she screamed at New World's terrifying realism.

"Kyaahhh! What, what is this? The mouse here looks bigger and scarier than a mouse in real life!"

The mice who were previously swarming around the warehouse, focused their attention on Roco. Blood had drained from Roco's face, and she quickly whirled around.

"I-, I can't! Fight these mice.... I, I can't do it! I'm not going to do it! Mister Kraydon, I wanna come out! Please open the door!"

Just then, Roco knocked over a stack of boxes, which wobbled and collapsed, blocking the door.

Then, a scarlet light flashed in front of Roco's eyes.

You have been attacked by a mouse. Damage 1.

However, Roco wasn't even concerned by the damage she had taken.

A mouse the size of her forearm came right up to her nose and bared its teeth. Rather than the damage she incurred, this was much more frightening.

With an expression on her face looking like she was on the verge of fainting, she screamed and climbed up the nearby stack of boxes. After frantically panicking, Roco belatedly thought of an escape plan.

"Oh, tha-that's right. This is a game. I can just log out. Disconnect!"

Game or not, she just wanted to flee the warehouse teeming with mice. However, as a brief message window popped up, even her last hope sputtered away.

You may not log out during combat. Please try again after finishing the battle.

“This is ridiculous! It can’t be like this! Save me. Aack! Please save me. Wah~ wah~!”

Roco bawled her eyes out as she barely managed to push off a mouse crawling up to her with the tip of her foot.

Unfortunately, in New World, there was no one who would save her even if she continually cried for help. In the end, Roco was trapped in the warehouse, unable to log out or escape. And so she wailed and wailed until her eyes became puffy.

How many hours has it been? Her throat was too sore to let out another scream. Then a new message window appeared.

You have learned a new skill.

Lady’s Wail (Beginner, Active): The wail of a Lady full of sorrows, making even irrational enemy feel guilt.

In addition, it will make an ally feel inclined to leap into fire for the sake of the Lady. However, this skill will only trigger when the player feels tremendous fear.

Enemy attack speed, movement speed, and morale decrease by 20% for 30 seconds, and ally attack speed, movement speed, and morale increase by 20% for 30 seconds.

Mana Cost: 20

\* \* \*

\* \* \*

At that time, Ark was grinning as he walked down the streets of Jackson.

“I feel slightly better now.

The constant irritation that had remained in a corner of his heart about playing the game had disappeared.

He had no intention of forgiving mistakes. People were quick to forgive those who whined that it was a mistake even after doing

something bad, so bad guys didn't learn their lesson and a just society couldn't be realized.

Evil doers had to pay the due price. If you're wronged, pay them back right away— that was justice. That was Ark's view on life.

Ark was finally able to achieve his justice.

Since Ark endured until Andel logged in if he didn't after 24 hours, Ark hadn't slept even a wink for two days. Despite that, he wasn't even a little tired. Rather, he was so refreshed that he felt he could fly.

Justice was a good thing after all.

'Now, shall we go and finish the quest now?'

Ark went to find Raymond's house with a vibrant expression on his face.

As soon as Ark went in, Raymond stared at him with a shocked expression.

"Ah! Y-you... returned. No way... did you bring that mineral?"

Ark smiled coldly and nodded his head. Then he took out the Blood Crystal and dropped it onto the table with a clink.

Raymond's face as he saw the Blood Crystal was filled with horror.

"You look quite surprised. Are you disappointed I've returned alive?"

"N-no. Wh-why would I?"

"After all, you must be disappointed since someone you sent as fodder returned safe and sound."

"Wh-what are you talking about? Fodder?"

Raymond denied it as he shook his head vigorously. But he was unable to hide the anxiety in his eyes.

There was no need to rush.

With a leisurely expression, Ark slowly drove him into a corner.

“You said that you went into that cave frequently. If that’s so, then of course you would know of the Golem’s existence. However, up till I went to the cave, I didn’t hear even a single word about the Golem from you, even though you knew it would be difficult to defeat the Golem with my strength. No, you sent me because you judged that it would be difficult for me to defeat it. From the beginning, the reason you sent me was to use me as food for the Golem that was raising the Blood Crystal within it.”

Raymond was startled and flinched when he heard the word ‘Blood Crystal.’

“Ho-how in the world did you hear about something like a Blood Crystal...?”

Raymond quickly avoided eye contact as he mumbled something like an excuse.

“I-I don’t know what you are saying.”

“Is that so?”

Ark shrugged and turned around.

“I understand. Then it looks like I have to find the Lord and ask him.”

“Wa-wait a minute!”

Astonished, Raymond tightly grasped onto Ark’s arm.

“Wha-what exactly do you want?”

“Are you admitting that you did it?”

Ark put on a wicked smile as he made his jab.

Raymond lowered his shoulders as if in despair and heaved a sigh.

“There, there was nothing I could do, either. If you know about the Blood Crystal, you must also know that it’s not just mineral. That’s right, the Blood Crystal is a magical mineral storing an ancient power. A long time ago, I held it by accident and was fascinated by that magical power. In the end, in order to cultivate the rest of the Blood Crystal that wanted more knowledge, I ended up planting it in the Golem’s body. And then I used strangers like you. But now, even that has come to an end. How would I have known that someone among the strangers would perhaps know of the Blood Crystal...”

Once he broke down, Raymond confessed everything in a steady stream.

As he stared at Ark with bitter eyes, he spoke, “I’ll confess everything I told you to the guards as well. In return, couldn’t you give me just a few days off?”

‘Seems like he’s a very stupid person.’

Ark snorted and was about to refuse.

Suddenly, he heard a coughing sound from Raymond’s room. Startled, Raymond quickly leapt into the room.

Ark followed him in and saw a young child coughing, who was obviously very sick, on a small bed.

With a tearful face, Raymond held the child’s hand.

“Oh, oh, my baby. Papa is right here.”

“P-papa... cough, cough!”

The child broke out into a cold sweat as he coughed violently.

While staring blankly at that sight, Ark asked, “Are you perhaps...”

“Please don’t ask anymore questions. It’s all over. In any case, the Golem was crushed while the Blood Crystal was in an incomplete state. No, even if the Blood Crystal was somehow completed, there’s no guarantee that the illness would be cured. I don’t resent you. And if you just wait a few days for me, I’ll be sure to turn myself into the guards. I beg of you. Please allow this hopeless father to watch over this poor child’s last road.”

As he looked at the beseeching Raymond, Ark was speechless.

He had no idea why he kept running into this kind of situation.

Indeed, he could definitely understand Raymond’s feelings. If his mother could completely recover, Ark would do anything. If he’d been in the same situation as Raymond, he would have done the same.

However, Raymond was an NPC. The dying child was also an NPC.

He knew. He knew that if he just finished the quest and received his reward, that would be the end of it. But why did he feel such an uncomfortable sensation? Why did he see his mother lying on her sickbed, why couldn’t he bring himself to just turn around and find the guard?

‘Dammit...!’

“Move it.”

Ark roughly shoved Raymond and grabbed the child’s hand.

“You’re okay. You’ll be able to recover your health just as your father wishes. You’ll be able to go outside and run like the other children while freeing the laughter that’s locked inside your chest.”

It was then, when Ark used his Nursing Skill. The Blood Crystal Ark was holding in his hands suddenly turned to dust and disappeared. Rays of light abruptly emerged from the dust, which was then absorbed by the child's body.

At the same time, a dramatic change occurred in the child's body. The coughing stopped in an instant and color returned to his face.

Miracle Nursing has succeeded.

You must convey the sincerity born of the sentiment called nursing to your patient- only then can it truly gain meaning. Sometimes, an illness or the like that cannot be cured with any kind of miraculous medicine or magic can be cured by sincerity.

Now, children who receive this sincere Nursing will recover completely; as you hoped, they will live vigorously while speaking of you as their benefactor of good deed to many people.

\*From succeeding Miracle Nursing, all your stats have increased by 1 each.

\* You have acquired a new stat, Affection (+ 10)

It will raise the success rate and effect of all actions that require affection by its numerical value.

Stat distribution is not possible, it will increase when you have done a good deed great enough to be talked about by other people.

\* Fame has increased by 50.

\* Your alignment to Good has increased by 50.

Since you succeeded Miracle Nursing, you have earned the title of Caretaker.

As a Caretaker, your fame increases and you will receive the praises of many of the sick.

\* As a title-related bonus, all stats increase by 1 each.

\* Fame increases by 50.

"H-how can this be!"

Raymond stared at Ark with a bewildered expression.

However, the truly bewildered person was Ark. He just used it once because he felt sorry just watching, but he hadn't known that it would yield this kind of result. After staring at the child with

dumbfounded eyes, Ark felt embarrassed to look at Raymond who was pouring out tears, so he quickly left the room.

“I’m gonna leave. Whether you turn yourself into the guard or not, do what you want.”

“Dammit, to give up a quest that’s almost completed... I must be crazy.’

To be honest, he did feel regret. However, Ark quickly shook his head.

It was a G difficulty quest anyways. Even if he let the guards know, he’d only receive that much of a reward. But Ark had already received a reward he hadn’t even imagined. All stats +2! As a bonus, since his agitation had also disappeared, now something like the quest was nothing.

“The hell, I don’t know. Should I just delete the quest?”

“Pl-please wait a minute!”

He’d left the house, but Raymond hurriedly followed him.

Then he grabbed Ark’s hand tightly as he pulled something out for him. One was the ingredient for making the Tool Box, Ailard Powder, and the other was a booklet with a faint light shining around it.

“Don’t you need to take the Ailard Powder? And this book is our family’s inherited heirloom. Although I still haven’t been able to properly interpret its meaning, it might be possible if it’s you. I’m sorry I can only give something like this. I beg you, please take it.”

Ark wasn’t one to refuse something like this. As Ark snatched and packed it away, Raymond spoke as he bowed.

“Thank you for accepting it. Also, I will definitely turn myself into the guard if my little boy gets well, like I promised to you. It’s not

because I'm afraid you'll accuse me, but because I want to become an honorable father to my little boy. So don't worry about me anymore."

Thu-thu-thump, the quest information window opened.

The Secrets of the Blood Crystal quest has been completed.  
You have found the hidden ending of Alchemist Raymond's request-type quest.

Hereby, the Alchemist Raymond sincerely confessed and is repenting on his sin. He will keep his promise to turn himself in and receive punishment.

Special reward: Experience + 5000, Raymond's Secret Book (Rare),  
Fame + 50

Through Raymond's Secret Book (Rare), you have learned a new skill.

Magic Restoration (Special, Beginner, Active): Using Mana, any kind of item can be restored to their original condition. However, if a novice uses it, the item's maximum durability will be cut by 10% each.

Decreased durability will cease to exist. If skill level rises, it will be possible to fully restore general items and repair higher level magic items.

Mana Consumption: 10

'A hidden ending!'

Ark's jaw dropped.

Although he hadn't even imagined it, it seemed the child's coughing sound was actually a diverging point of the quest. Thanks to that, Ark had gone up a level and had even learned the repair skill he'd regretted so much.

Although there was a penalty to the durability unlike the normal repair, the explanation that full repair was possible if he raised the skill level was also attached. In any case, he had learned a skill that

only Warriors could.

Kind acts were rewarded after all.

Moreover, Ark hadn't gotten the real reward he'd worked towards yet. When Ark returned with the Ailard Powder, Norton rejoiced.

"Ooh, so you got it. Thank you. Now I can supply General and Deluxe Toolboxes, 100 each, to the Lord. I'll deliver it, so don't worry. And here, this is your share. The 8 percent I agreed to discount you on calculates in money to 200 gold, and that's left after the price of the 2 Deluxe Tool Boxes from last time. 11 Deluxe Tool Boxes."

He still needed the Tool Box since Magic Restoration was still beginner level.

Ark stored the toolboxes inside his bag and headed towards the plaza.

\* \* \*

The plaza's bulletin board was pasted full of countless flyers. Guild recruitment ads... and even wanted flyers were there.

If a Chaotic user's infamy rose, the Lord or the NPC Guard Chief would post wanted flyers like this.

Ordinarily the NPCs took care of it, but there were also users who specialized in hunting wanted criminals. That was because they could obtain magic items more comfortably than by catching a boss monster.

However, the flyer Ark was scrutinizing was something different.

A newsletter: it was a flyer similar to New World's regional newspaper. A newly discovered region, brief information about a dungeon, or an event taking place in various villages and the like were written.

Ark was of a mind to finish up his Jackson life if he rose another 1 or 2 levels. Then he planned to choose a few places from among the regions that looked alright and leave for an adventure. Since there were no quests he had received, he was uncertain about deciding his destination.

Just then, he heard a loud “wow” from one side of the village.

When he turned to look, a huge crowd was gathered at the plaza.

“Wow, are those people part of the expedition to raid the Labyrinth of Tarsha?”

“Have you heard the quest difficulty is + + C?”

“Holy shit. I haven’t even received an E rank quest yet.”

“We wouldn’t be able to do it even if we received one. Our levels are different.”

“Just look at their gear. They’re all plastered with Magic items and even Rares.”

“Sigh, when will I be able to put on one of those.”

“Look there, it’s Sir Alan!”

The chattering people’s attention focused to one side.

The person who approached as he received their attention was a Knight riding a white horse. He was a handsome Knight with flowing golden hair wearing a flashing full plate armor set that you could tell was a Rare item at first sight. His arrival took everyone’s breath away.

“I think someone said Sir Alan job-changed to ‘Holy Knight,’ one of the hidden professions.”

Holy Knight was one of the few known hidden professions.

“So that’s why there are a lot of soldiers who look like NPCs.”

“Ooh, just look at that item. New World was launched only recently...”

“They say he started one month after the launch, later than us.”

“The gear of the people who are participating in the attack party with him are no joke either.”

A raid gathered several parties to complete ++ difficulty quests that couldn’t be completed with just one party.

It was usually made up of only users, but depending on the quest story, sometimes NPCs joined too. In particular, for a character with high fame like the Holy Knight, the chance of NPCs joining rose.

‘So that’s the highly rumored Holy Knight.’

Although Ark had heard rumors about him here and there, it was his first time seeing him. While Ark was currently satisfied with his profession of being a Dark Walker, at first Ark had also wanted to choose a Warrior-type hidden profession like that.

Granted, no matter what type it was, finding a hidden profession quest was like finding a needle in a haystack....

While Ark was staring blankly at the people, someone from the crowd suddenly approached him.

It was a female Magician with a black robe and her hood lowered all the way to her chin.

“Are you by any chance Mr. Kim Hyun Woo?”

A dumbfounded expression arose on Ark’s face.

He'd never imagined that someone would call him by his real name in a game where there was not a single person he knew.

Furthermore, it was a woman? He had no idea who it was.

"That's right... who are you?"

"Ah, so I was right after all. I thought it might be you since you had the same face."

"Do you know me?"

The Magician took off her deeply lowered hood.

Ark squinted as he looked her over. The Magician was a pointy-eared female Elf. He was definitely seeing this character for the first time, but somehow she felt familiar. His memory wavered dimly between remembrance and oblivion.

As Ark tilted his head, she smiled with a sheepish expression.

"Ah, seems like you don't quite recognize me after all. Have I modified my appearance too much, perhaps?"

Ark was finally able to recognize her after seeing her smiling face.

"Ah! Are you perhaps the person I saw at the interview?"

"Yes, I'm Kang Misu. Here, I go by the name Lariette."

"Right, my character's name is Ark."

Ark quickly bowed his head to greet her.

He didn't know why he couldn't recognize her face right away. Actually, Ark had thought of her several times so far. No, to be truthful, he'd thought of her quite often. It was natural to feel favorable towards a woman who had shown interest in him in an

unfamiliar place and had even cheered him on, especially since she was a woman whose beauty that outshone that of an idol. But that was that. He hadn't even hoped for an opportunity like meeting her again.

But to meet in a place like this by chance, and it was she who first recognized and talked to him on top of it...

"So you started as an Elf."

"Yes, it's a bit strange, right?"

"No, it suits you well."

They weren't empty words. There were few people who suited the Elf this much.

At Ark's compliment, Lariette toyed with her pointy ears as her face reddened.

"But it looks like you're going to participate in the raid this time."

"Yes, my level isn't quite there yet, but I entered through an invitation from someone I know."

"What is your level?"

"I got a lot of help from the person I know, but I'm still only at 50."

Lariette replied with an embarrassed expression.

Ark choked.

"F-fifty?"

"Yes. Is something the matter?"

"Oh, no. Your level is quite higher than I anticipated."

“What level is Ark-nim at?”

“I am now 35...”

As Ark responded in a voice as loud as ants crawling on the ground, Lariette revealed a rather surprised expression. Then she followed by shaking her head with a disappointed expression.

“I’m sorry to say something like this, but Ark-nim, that’s a little severe. Actually, among the candidates, I’m on the low side of levels. The likely people are around level 70. The attack party leader Alan-nim is also a candidate, but this time his level went over 75. Honestly with Ark-nim’s level...”

Even if he didn’t hear the rest of it, he could guess her next words. It was probably that it would be difficult for him to pass Global Exos’ test. He’d basically known, but hearing it right in front of him sucked the energy out of him.

Just then, the Knight riding the white horse approached from behind Lariette. It was Alan, the Holy Knight.

“Lariette-nim, what are you doing there?”

“I met someone I know, so I was just having a little talk.”

“Someone you know?”

Alan examined Ark up and down with a slightly uncomfortable eye.

“Ark-nim is also an applicant.”

“Then your level must be alright. The quest this time has quite a high difficulty so we’re low on people, so this is good. Would you like to join the raid?”

“No, Ark-nim is still....”

Lariette studied Ark's expression as she whispered something to Alan. As soon as she did so, a flash of ridicule glimmered through Alan's eyes. ..

"Well, each person has their own circumstance. Excuse me."

Alan turned his horse as if there was nothing left to see.

"Now then, Lariette-nim, let us be off."

"Ah, yes. I'll be going now. Please work hard."

Lariette stared at Ark with bittersweet eyes before turning around. Ark felt an empty feeling while watching her back. He felt like his hope was walking away from him with her.

Actually, Ark had felt smug these last few days.

He had grown used to the Dark Walker profession, and he'd ruined Andel, who'd been far ahead of him. Not long ago, he'd even found a quest's hidden ending and had received a reward up to his expectation. It seemed like everything was progressing almost too smoothly.

He had even thought that he might have a chance at passing the much-hoped for Global Exos' test.

But in the end, that was all just his delusion.

Ark's rivals, the other candidates, were going to do a + + C difficulty quest from an unimaginably high place. The difference between them and Ark was one that he had vaguely expected.

That's right. He'd expected it to some extent.

Unlike them, Ark couldn't afford to concentrate on playing games all day. So over time, the difference was bound to grow. In addition, he'd wasted a whole two weeks of time in Harun Village, so this

much difference might be certain.

He'd known. He knew, but...

'Dammit. I feel really shitty.'

An unbearable feeling surged and welled up.

It wasn't just because he had fallen behind the other candidates. Alan's ridicule-filled eyes. And Lariette, who followed him.

When he looked back at the scene, Ark felt like he had just lost Lariette to Alan. It was just something within a game, but New World was a game that was more real than reality. So he felt the sense of defeat more keenly than in real life.

He didn't want to lose anymore.

No matter what the cost!

\* \* \*

'It'll be really bad at this rate.'

After seeing Alan leading the attack party, Hyun Woo couldn't shake off his testiness.

When the Planning Director Ha Myung Woo gave her speech in the interview hall, she had said they weren't going to just look at levels. However, level was one of the absolute numbers in the game.

A higher level player can hunt stronger monsters. Naturally, the chances of getting a better item increased, they could proceed to a broader expanse of regions, and they could receive higher difficulty quests. In the end, level was an absolute value in all senses.

Falling behind from that meant failing the test soon.

He had to catch up. It was the only method of survival.

'Is there any way to increase my game time?'

As always, the problem was time.

He was confident he could catch up if he could concentrate on the game with the same amount of time as the other candidates. However, Hyun Woo could only invest just 6 hours in one day. He had to decrease his sleeping time while fighting fatigue to make even that time possible.

To be honest, he didn't expect much for Global Exos' test.

He still thought so even now. However, if he was to fail the test, he wouldn't be able to play New World anymore. He didn't know what would happen after one or two months, but in the end, he wouldn't be able to meet Ark, the character he'd raised with such care, ever again. His efforts so far would all be wasted.

'And Alan!'

Forgetting how Ark had suffered his disregard was unacceptable.

Ark was Hyun Woo himself. Insulting Ark was no different than insulting Hyun Woo. If he could, he wanted to raise his level like crazy and strip Alan like Andel and laugh as much as he wanted at him.

Even so, he couldn't give up reality because of a game.

Although the money paid to him by Global Exos was enough for him to get by, he still couldn't afford his mother's hospital fee if he didn't work. Even now, wasn't it true that the wage he received from the mart, his three part-time jobs, and the money from Global Exos was only barely enough to cover it?

'Even so, I can't keep increasing the debt here...'

What a dilemma, it was a situation in which he couldn't do it even if he did this or tried that.

'Half a year! No, even for just a couple of months, is there no way I can concentrate on playing the game?'

Just then, news he had seen a few days ago suddenly flashed in his mind.

It was an article about buying and selling in game items. Now that he thought of it, he vaguely remembered hearing stories of people making a lot of money just by selling game items.

Now that item trading was completely legal, it was a time when item trading occupied one place in the market. Hyun Woo did remember his school days when he'd earned pocket-money from selling items in an online game. He just hadn't been able to connect that to living expenses, but it was certain that items could become money.

For a game like New World, items could definitely be sold more expensively.

'Maybe I could sell items and use the money from the sale to pay for mother's hospital fees? Well, with my current level, the items I can get won't get that much money, but... New World hasn't been open for very long anyways. There'll be many people who need items that I can obtain at my level. Yeah, let's try at least looking it up once.'

Hyun Woo found and entered the auction site that he'd auctioned in ages ago.

As expected, New World's item auction was actively growing.

As he searched through the catalogue, seeing the market prices made his jaw drop.

"Wh-what is this? Is this really the price of a game item?"

The items of New World were being sold at an unimaginable price.

When Hyun Woo had played his online game, items worth tens of hundreds, tens of millions of won had been traded, but those were items for the very top level players.

However, New World was a whole different level.

A price of one gold was equivalent to 10,000 won (~\$10), and a magic sword for level 20-30s was being sold for at least a million won (~\$1,000).

For Rare or Uniques, depending on the stats, they ranged from several hundred thousand won to ten million won.

Indeed, the items were valuable. It was a world that Hyun Woo, who would skip a few meals in order to save a few thousand won, couldn't even imagine.

'1 gold equals 10,000 won... Then the toolboxes I've obtained today are worth two million won!'

It really shocked him.

'Maybe the items I have can also be sold at a high price?'

After agonizing, Hyun Woo tried posting the Blood-red Mantle of Dreams on the auction. It was a level 20's Unique item that demonstrated an immense advantage in a fight against a user.

It was a treasure Hyun Woo cherished, but there wasn't really any other item he could sell that was worth much money. Then, like fire, within a few minutes hundreds of bidders entered the bidding war. After an hour had passed, the price had soared to 400 million won (~4,000 USD).

It was equivalent to 2 months of Hyun Woo's salary and a half a month of hospital fees.

It was mind-boggling.

'Holy smokes, what have I been doing all this time?'

Even though it was Unique, it was limited to level 20 and even had a curse on it.

But 4 million won in just one hour! He hadn't even imagined that a single item like that would rake in an enormous price like this.

However, Hyun Woo was unaware of a simple truth.

It was exactly because of Global Exos' candidates. New World's items were expensive to begin with, but it hadn't been this much. But as the candidates shook the money bag, like a gust of wind, even the prices of low-level items had exploded several times their price within one month.

Andel was the same. You couldn't drink recovery potions like water by making gold like normal. That ruthless power of luxury came from cash. In any case, to Hyun Woo, the entire situation felt like a light of salvation.

'This is it. This is exactly it!'

The way to focus on only playing the game!

'I can earn money from the game!'

After finally finding the method, he felt more furious that he hadn't known until now.

At the end of the auction, the Blood-red Mantle of Dreams was sold for 4,500,000 won.

He also auctioned off Andel's plated armor set because although the defense was good, there was too much of a penalty for users who weren't Warriors. Even though it was normal armor, in the end it sold

for 2,500,000 won.

Although he was regretful about selling them, he disregarded that after thinking of it as an investment.

If he could concentrate on the game all day, there was nothing to regret.

By selling the mantle and Andel's armor, two months of hospital fees had already fallen into his hands. It was small, but it meant he could just play the game without thinking about anything else for two months. If he made money like this, he might even be able to buy a unit one day.

Even if he were to fail the test, if he can continue to play New World, he could earn money.

'Alright, we're gonna try this!'

For the first time, Hyun Woo had embarked on the path of a professional gamer.

The next day, 7,000,000 won (~\$7,000) was deposited into his bank account.

As soon as Hyun Woo confirmed the balance in his account, he headed to the Mart. The owner poured curses on him for not showing up for a week. In the face of that, Hyun Woo politely handed his resignation over and fled the mart.

There hadn't been anyone who'd been particularly friendly with Ark. He didn't feel even a little wisp of something like regret.

If there was just one person that he regretted, it was his coworker Hye Sun. Hye Sun, who had never lost her smile although she faced difficult circumstances at home, like Hyun Woo. Even Hyun Woo, who'd never given much care to other people, thought affectionately of her as a little sister.

It was inadequate, but he wanted to personally explain his situation at least to her.

“It might be laughable that I’m quitting because of a game, but it’s something extremely important to me.”

“But this suddenly...”

Hye Sun made a tearful face.

“Don’t be too sad. My mother’s hospital is nearby, anyways. Whenever I come and go, I’ll come buy you a drink. And if anything happens, call me any time; whether it’s mice or whatever, I’ll come catch them for you right away.”

“Mice...” Hye Sun giggled as she muttered to herself, “Alright, that other thing... now anything is fine.”

Hye Sun looked aloof, as if she’d peeled away a layer of worry.

“By the way oppa, if it’s for the game, you’re always going to be in New World, right?”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Well then, okay. I’ll see you in there.”

“What? You started playing New World? What’s your in game name?”

“It’s still a secret. I’ll come find you soon. Wherever you are,” Hye Sun replied with a beautiful smile.

\* \* \*

“Huhuhuhu.”

A spooky laughter echoed in the Shadow Forest.

The person with a bat and a skull beside him, exuding an aura stained with greed was none other than Ark.

It was not the same Ark as yesterday. The determination to do his absolute utmost was alive in Ark's face. It was a definite change. From today, Ark had been reborn as a professional gamer.

"Master, why are you acting like that? It's frightening."

Sensing Ark's change, Bat became terrified and shivered.

"Shut up. You get ready too— from now on there'll be no breaks. Bat, go scout the surroundings. Find a place where there'll be a lot of gathered monsters."

"I-I get it. Calm down."

With his sword raised, Ark pounded through the Shadow Forest like a madman.

"Wait and see, Alan! One day I will make you fall on your knees right in front of me!"

The entire Shadow Forest heaved. In the past, he had fled if he thought it might be a large group, but now, he went around looking for places where the monsters gathered instead. And when he discovered one, his eyes flashed as he charged.

It wasn't madness, but greed that soaked his sword as it slashed down helpless Zombies and Ghouls helplessly. That wasn't all. He stripped away all the food ingredients he could call ingredients in the area to the point that the forest felt chilly.

'I can't afford to complain about my profession. Since I've already chosen it, I'll become the best with this profession. And to become the best, I have to apply 100 percent of the profession's special characteristic!"

Ark did not rest even for just a minute.

If he rested for a moment to recover his Health, he immediately made Survival Cooking and shoveled food into his Familiars.

“Sa-save us! PLEASE STOP!”

The Bat and Skull exploded with screams, but Ark had no mercy. That was because raising his Familiars’ stats meant Ark would become stronger.

Whenever he acquired an equipment drop from a monster, he would repair it continuously with restore magic until the durability dropped to 1. In order to save even a penny, it was necessary to increase his restore magic early on. It was the same for other skills as well.

No matter which skill it was, if he just raised it, he would either become stronger or it would cost him less money.

There was a reason to raise it with his life on the line.

“Give me your experience! Give me your money! Give me your items!”

At Ark’s frenzied hunting, Undead monsters and the like now furtively avoided him. While his motivation overflowed at even the sight of an Undead’s head, right as he was on the brink of exploding in anger, Ark detected an incredibly dangerous opponent.

A few days after starting to hunt like this, a formidable monster showed up at last. The medium boss that emerged if you slayed a certain number of Undead monsters, the Reaper. A Reaper with a blurred figure approached him cloaked in a black robe as it swung its enormous scythe.

“How dare you make a ruckus in my territory!”

A low cry shook the Shadow Forest.

A truly terrifying sight. However, it only appeared as a lump of experience in Ark's eyes.

Ark's level had already become 39 though hunting in the Shadow Forest. With his 20 percent ability bonus in the dark applied, he was no different from a player in the late 40s.

He had raised his skills dramatically, so Sword-Hand Combat had also reached Intermediate.

Even if the Reaper was a level 50 monster, there was no reason to fear it.

“I don't have time to chat. Come at me!”

“Kukuku. To come at the chief gatekeeper of the spirit world for a human subject, you childish rotten bastard!”

The Reaper rushed towards Ark as it swung its scythe.

Ark quickly dove within melee range as he loosed Dark Blade.

As a BOOM sound echoed, the Reaper wobbled as it stepped back.

The Bat and Skull rammed the Reaper on both sides at the same time.

The Bat and Skull were both desperate. That was because the amount of food they had to eat would depend on the result at the end of the battle.

“Kwak, these little...!”

While the Reaper was still wobbly, Ark used Cat's Eyes.

The Reaper's Health appeared above its head as red points were drawn here and there on its body. They were weaknesses perceived through Cat's Eyes.

Ba-ba-ba-bang!

As he ravaged the red points, the Reaper's health dropped noticeably.

Once its Health was cut to half, a black aura erupted from the Reaper's body.

"Feel the fear of death!"

Bat and Skull, who were swept by the aura of horror, convulsed and stiffened.

The Reaper swung its scythe at Ark as if to end him with one stroke. But the scythe was blocked by the sword Ark swung and bounced off.

The Reaper's eyes were stained with disbelief.

"H-how can this be? A human was able to overcome his fear of death?"

"I'm more afraid of poverty than death!"

Ark pushed forward coldly as he swung his sword.

Dark Walkers had a 50% resistance to Fear. That went up another 20% in the dark. If it wasn't a Fear used by a monster with a huge level difference, there was almost no possibility of him getting hexed by it.

After Ark resisted the Fear, the Reaper cringed even more. After that, Ark had full control of the battle.

As his Sword-Hand Combat attacks fell like a max-output storm on the Reaper, it quickly dropped into critical condition.

The Reaper couldn't take it anymore and attempted to flee despite the humiliation.

“Argh! Ju-just wait and see!”

“You think I’d let you go?! Dark Blade!”

Ark narrowed the distance in a single breath and loosed Dark Blade on the Reaper’s back, which was rife with red spots.

His mana was increased by 100 because of the Crystal Golem Head he was equipping. Thanks to that, he could cast Dark Blade three times even after using Cat’s Eyes.

One, two, three!

Critical hits exploded in quick succession. The Reaper’s Health hit the bottom at last, and it screamed with a burst of charcoal miasma. Then the body appeared to slowly dim, then suddenly disappeared with an intense explosion.

“KUAAAK! FOR THI-THIS BODY TO BE DEFEATED BY THE LIKES OF A HUMAN...!”

Ark had no interest in something like the Reaper’s dying words.

The only thing that held Ark’s interest was the large scythe the Reaper had dropped.

“Information window!”

It was a weapon two times stronger than the Sharply Shining Sword that Ark used.

Even considering that it was a two-handed weapon, it was a weapon with a considerably high attack damage.

The options were good too since there were many occasions where one had to fight Undead when they were under level 40. Although Ark couldn’t use it because it was a Warrior-use weapon, he still

made a satisfied smile.

'It'll sell for a nice price since there are a lot of Warrior users.'

The Reaper was a monster with an atrocious item drop-rate. Even this much could be called a bonanza.

From 80% experience, he immediately went up a level after killing the Reaper.

'Finally level 40! I have achieved my goal in the Shadow Forest!'

Ark urgently opened his status window to distribute his stats.

### Passive skills

Sword-Hand Combat (Intermediate: 113/300): Polishes Hand-to-Hand Combat and Sword Mastery to increase overall fighting power.

Survival Cooking (Beginner: 92/100) Makes unidentified dishes with ingredients obtained from nature.

Indomitable Will (Beginner: 68/100) When in critical condition, Attack Power, Critical Hit Chance, and Recovery Speed are increased.

Indomitable Body (Beginner: 61/100) When in critical condition, Defense, Critical Hit Evasion, and Recovery Speed are increased.

Foraging (Beginner: 82/100) Food ingredients from nature can be gathered.

Ingredient Identification (Beginner: 71/100) Confirms effect of ingredient

Riding (Beginner: 3/100) Can handle a horse more skillfully with greater skill level.

### Active Skills

Nursing (Intermediate: 149/300) Gives hope, energy, and courage to patients.

Mana consumption: 10

Spirit of the Cat (Advanced: 374/500) Plants fear in mice and other small monsters, sealing off their movements; their Attack Power, Defense, and Morale are sharply decreased.

Mana consumption: 120

Eyes of the Cat (Beginner: 88/100) Penetrates the enemy with a sharp gaze.

Mana consumption: 50

Restore Magic (Beginner: 59/100) Restore an item to its original state.

Mana consumption: 10

### Profession Only Skills

Dark Blade (Beginner: 42/100) Deals a one-hit blow to the enemy's weak point.

Mana consumption: 100

Summon Demon (Beginner: 24/100) Summons up to three demons from the Netherworld.

Mana consumption: 100

With determination, his skill development also quickened enormously.

If he put every ounce of his energy into each and every sword strike when he used Sword-Hand Combat and preciously devoted his entire soul to Foraging, even if he used them the same number of times, his skill proficiency growth doubled in speed.

This was a fact he'd realized while nursing Viscount Haverstein. However, Ark had not utilized this knowledge properly until now.

You didn't just do one thing in the game. Hunting, foraging, resting, cooking, trading, etc.. the work to be done was as high as a mountain. It wasn't easy to put his heart and soul into every single one of those actions, especially for Ark, who played the game while reducing sleeping time.

But now, the situation was different.

Ark had now become someone who makes a livelihood by being a gamer.

'New World is the only way to live! I must get stronger if only to survive!'

It seemed like his stats and skills reflected the last few intense days.

Plus, a few of his skills were on the brink of rising from Beginner to Intermediate. Until those skills all became Intermediate, Ark would swiftly develop them once again. In addition, his Familiars' stats had also gone up a few times, so now they were quite useful.

'Now, if I just raise my level once or twice and my skills also go up, I can hunt level 50 monsters with little trouble.'

However, Ark still felt he was lacking something.

Although he'd already killed the level 50 monster Reaper without much difficulty, that was only possible because he received the bonus from the dark. Honestly, it was still too much to fight level 50s. There.. utilized all sorts of skills.

'That's right, I shouldn't be satisfied with just this. I still have a long way to go to catch up to Alan.'

Global Exos' employment test and item hunting to make money. These two were his greatest objectives in playing New World. And catching up to Alan became one of Ark's goals to achieve.

Since that day when he was humiliated in front of Lariette...

'Anyways, since I've caught the Reaper now, seems its about time to move hunting grounds.'

Just then, his main window unexpectedly popped up in front of his

eyes. In the middle of icons lined up in a circle, his bag icon was flashing.

With his head tilted, Ark touched it and opened the bag. The Jewel Hand Mirror he'd earned from defeating Debra was quivering.

"Right, the Hand Mirror was a level 40 quest starter item!"

Ark took out the Hand Mirror.

You have gained a lot of experience. Even if you do not try, the knowledge you have naturally gathered from walking the world, breathing, talking, and listening will become the key that will lead you to yet another adventure.

This is one among the many kinds of items that treasure countless secrets. A mirror that was specially crafted has fallen into your hands through one of your adventures.

You, who possess a rudimentary knowledge of ancient relics, have carefully inspected the mirror. You quickly realized that someone's memory was sealed inside with ancient power.

Bonus from the knowledge you acquired from observing the Ancient Relic Jewel Hand Mirror:

Knowledge of Ancient Relics + 5, Intelligence + 2, and Fame has increased by 20.

When you are ready to challenge a new adventure, the mirror will know of your decision on its own and will guide you. However, it is not known if the mirror's guidance will bring your good luck or unhappiness.

\*As you have become level 40, the Jewel Hand Mirror's seal can be lifted.

Would you like to lift the seal?

There was nothing to hesitate about.

"Unseal!"

\*Flash\* -!

In an instant, an incredible light burst from the Jewel Hand Mirror.

A magical film unfolded with the background of the dark Shadow Forest as the screen.

It was a film that was clear, yet somehow gave off a worn-off feeling, as if it depicted a scene from one part of an old book.

The scene illuminated by the mirror was a beach with a beautiful lighthouse.

A soft breeze caressed the buoyant clouds and gentle waves tumbled as they churned white froth. The sound of singing floated in on the wind on the peaceful beach.

It was a language he'd never heard before. He couldn't tell the meaning. But the sorrow brimming in the singing shook a place deep inside Ark's heart. How much time passed like that?

The dreamlike singing gradually faded, and words popped up.

For Christin's sake...

The Mysterious Mirror's Whisper

From inside the mysterious mirror, images prompted Debra's arrival on the unknown beach. An indication of a long and far journey. When you're ready, go on a journey to the unknown beach and solve the mystery of the mirror. The mirror will serve as your guide and lead you to the lighthouse.

An incomprehensible film of a seaside has emerged from the Hand Mirror that Debra had. This is hinting a long and far journey. If you are done preparing for the journey, you must find the beach and solve the secret of the mirror. Just as a lighthouse guides a ship, the mirror will guide you.

Difficulty: F

Quest requirement: Requires Knowledge of Ancient Relics.

"It's a quest!"

Ark, who had stirred from the song with a hazy expression, opened his eyes like a flash.

A quest. Which meant a reward.

It was common sense that rather than catching hundreds of normal monsters, completing one nicely rewarded quest yielded more experience and money. In addition, this quest was started from an item dropped by Debra, which boasted a +E difficulty.

It wasn't a quest that would end with a reward of just a few gold.

Ark accepted the quest without hesitation.

In an instant, a ray of light extended from the mirror northwards, under the night sky.

"As the lighthouse guides ships... so this is what it meant."

It was a ray of light that would guide him to the beach of the film.

Ark slung Skull on his back and gazed at Bat, which was circling him as it flapped around.

"Let's go, Skull, Bat. We will follow this light to solve the quest."

"Alright, Master. I'll be good, so don't feed me food."

\*Clack clack clack clack.\*

Like that, with him leading his two Familiars, Ark walked northwards, where the light extended.

Ark's adventure was just getting started.

To be continued...

# Credits

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